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A SINNER'S SENTENCE

BY
ALFRED LARDER



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A SINNER'S SENTENCE

CHAPTER XXV.

The next afternoon.

RUIN, disgrace, and despair ! The entire Communion Service would inadequately describe my sentiments towards Lisette. With hope before me, I was too late. Fool that I was not to act on Vera's letter sooner ! to be foiled for the sake of a few hours ! It is not usual to beat one's breast or tear one's hair nowadays, or I feel equal to it, and I clench my teeth as I write with an imprecation and a fervent wish that it was in Lisette's

throat they were fastening. But a truce to reflection : that has no comfort ; let me record the events of the day.

I arose at the abnormal hour of eight. I am not a sybarite, but I do abominate early rising. I was quietly dressing myself and revolving my plan of action, when a note was brought me from Blanche. It ran as follows :

‘ DEAREST BERTIE,

‘ Lisette has been so strange last night and this morning, and wishes to see you in my presence. I should not dream of sending for you at her request, but that she seems to have something on her mind ; and to please me, I am sure you will not refuse me half an hour after breakfast. I hope this may reach you in time to prevent your making another engagement ; but if not, do postpone it for a short time, and come to me.

‘ Your affectionate

‘ BLANCHE.’

Not very appetizing for breakfast—‘The game is up!’ was my mental comment. A rapid vision of Vera and the backwoods rose up before me, but I would not run away ; although to sit and listen to all my infamy dragged to the light of day was anything but a tempting prospect, and could do no good. Still, I must remain and brazen out the disclosure ; there was no escape but ignominious flight, and that I would not avail myself of.

One rapid attempt to save myself I did make. I wrote a hurried note to Lisette, enjoining her urgently to keep silence, and I would do what she wished. I found the most reliable man I could, and entrusted it to him with half a sovereign, and the promise of another if he could deliver it ; but he returned without success, and with the information that he ‘could not find Mademoiselle Lisette nowhere about the ’ouse,’ and he dare not penetrate into ‘Miss ’Aviland’s rooms,

because she was hin,' and he was afraid of her.

After that I made a hurried circuit myself, hoping to encounter Lisette, but fruitlessly. I could do nothing—my plans were being defeated, and I was helpless. The thought was maddening ! I met young Fawcett, who remarked, ' You look pale, old chappie ; what's the matter ? Chippy ? Come to my room ; I've got the grandest pick-me-up there is—strychnine, and all sorts of deadly drugs, so that, if you are very bad indeed, you can poison yourself, and have done with it. See the idea—kill or cure ? You won't, eh ? Well, ta-ta : I'm off to take a photo of the new mare the mother bought last week.'

Anathematizing him and pick-me-ups in general, though I sadly needed one, I hastened back to my rooms to compose myself for a few moments, and then I went down to breakfast. I could eat nothing, but fortified myself

with coffee and brandy, and no slight proportion of the latter, until I felt I had gained some Dutch courage, although the impulse to shirk the interview was nearly overpowering. I sent again to Lisette, but she was secure in Blanche's rooms, and would let no one have access to her.

Best to get it over, I thought, and I went to receive my sentence with the sensations of a criminal marching to the drop. A man, when thoroughly found out, must have a heart and mien of solid brass to be confident and comfortable; and as I thought of Blanche's high-minded contempt for my deceit, and what a heartless, ungrateful traitor I had been, I could have wished to be annihilated.

Blanche must have had some inkling of what was coming, for she received me with an inflexible face, grave thanks, and an apology for troubling me. She was seated rigidly erect,

and fixed her questioning eyes on me; then, withdrawing them, she turned their full power on Lisette, who was sitting down pretending to cry: snivelling little hypocrite that she was, I could hardly restrain myself from wringing her neck! I expect I looked guilty, for Blanche's face had hardened, and she began in stern, dignified tones:

‘Now, Lisette, I am ready to hear what you have to say.’

I interposed, determined not to lose a point, my sang-froid coming back to me marvellously at the crisis.

‘Will you pardon me, my dear Blanche? but as I have an idea that this will resolve itself into a court of inquiry into certain doings of mine, I should like the proceedings conducted on a definite basis. It is only proper that my accuser should be heard first, but I claim the right to reply to her charges *seriatim*; in fact, to controvert them where I

can ; and I also beg you to suspend your judgment, and not let the fact of my being compelled to admit the truth of some of the accusations prejudice me on the other counts '—I was nearly adding 'My lud.'

This was really talking for the sake of it, but I thought I was getting on beautifully, although my eloquence suffered the same fate as most of that which you hear in the law-courts, viz., it was thrown away ; and here there was no imaginative, soft-hearted jury whose sympathies I could enlist.

Blanche's face assumed an expression of aversion, and she said coldly :

'Pray do as you think best, but if I have to hear something I have no wish to—and these scenes are excessively unpleasant—for heaven's sake let us get on.'

Lisette began in a whining tone like a whipped dog :

'I have always tried to do my duty to

madame : she has been so good to me, and I feel every gratitude——’

‘Yes, yes!’ interrupted Blanche; ‘never mind that.’

‘Madame will remember Mees Marchmont. Oh, I do not like to tell the shame of it!’ Lisette said with hypocritical prudery, and then paused.

‘Go on, Lisette, this moment!’ answered Blanche pitilessly and imperiously.

‘Well, madame,’ piped Lisette, ‘I made the discovery by accident that Mees Marchmont was living at E—Eden—Edenford, as Mr. Clifford’s wife.’ And she covered her face with her hands in assumed horror.

Blanche turned to me with an expression in her face that I hope never to see on mortal features again. Despair, disgust, incredulity, contempt, and loathing—all mingled in a look I shall never forget.

‘Is this true?’ was all she said, and I

thought the shock had been too much for her, for she swayed as if under an actual blow.

I rushed forward, but she repulsed me, saying, in a harsh voice which had lost all semblance to its usual tones, 'Go away ; your very touch is contamination ! Do I hear aright, or is this a hideous dream ? But no, your face owns the infamy !'

'Yes, indeed, madame !' chimed in Lisette, eager with gratified malice ; 'and Miss Marchmont is now at Lambton-on-Sea.'

'Be silent, Lisette,' said Blanche, who had somewhat recovered herself, in her haughtiest accents. 'I wish to hear no more of this abominable story !'

'Now, will you hear me ?' I interposed with a calmness I was far from feeling. 'Miss Marchmont was unhappy after the trouble she had caused here. I was sorry for her, and persuaded her to accept my assistance. I

never was a saint ; I tempted her, and she yielded. It is a very common story.'

'Don't attempt any justification, or I shall ring for Mrs. Fawcett, and expose your vile conduct. You come to me with a lie on your lips, you pretend regard for me, and actually presume to *defile* me with the attentions and caresses you have just been bestowing on her. I hate myself for the thought—I shudder when I remember them !'

The accent on 'defile' was worthy of Sara Bernhardt. If I had not just then had my emotions under tolerable control, it would have crushed me, I am sure. Lisette was rocking herself gently forward and backward, pointing each sentence with her movements, and wearing a smug, cat-like look.

'One moment,' I said smoothly ; 'Lisette has not added, because she did not know, the intelligence that I and Miss Marchmont have parted for ever. In the face of my approaching

marriage, and my love for you'—here Blanche sniffed with indignant disdain—'I had no choice but to put an end to the tie between us, and which would have been severed long since, as it was irksome in the extreme, but that I did not wish to behave cruelly to the girl who had trusted me.'

Lisette exclaimed 'Ah!' and gave a start, as I said Vera and I were parted.

Blanche remarked with fine scorn :

'Fancy so much consideration for that creature! Pray, where is she now—gone on the streets?'

'Vera repented deeply,' I said gravely, 'and if she is not already there, she will soon be an inmate of a religious house, whose members spend their time in rigid self-denial and in charity ; and she hopes to make some reparation for her sin.'

'How interesting!' replied Blanche with bitter sarcasm ; 'now you have cast her off,

she takes to religion. From sin to hypocrisy—a fit ending to such a career, I declare!

‘Blame me as you will,’ I answered, thankful for a little respite; ‘but spare her. She suffered tortures of remorse, and would have given the world to undo what she had done.’

‘I suppose they all say that; and since you considered her so praiseworthy, so faultless, why didn’t you make her an honest woman?’ was Blanche’s retort.

‘You know the reason well enough,’ I said; ‘I have told you; but I will not mention it again now. Why not believe me? You would have married me, and I delayed asking it until I could come to you with a clear conscience, and the past blotted out.’

‘You were engaged to me,’ broke out Blanche furiously, ‘and you spend your time with a wretched degraded creature! You actually pass as her husband, you live with her, and you come to me fresh from her

shameful kisses. You have the assurance to pretend you care for me with a love that, like a slimy serpent, leaves a trail behind, that withers and blights everything it touches. You talk to me of love ! Judas himself was no bigger traitor ! You led me to love you. I forgave you that disgraceful affair of Mrs. Nelson's, believing you were free from all entanglements, and you have the incredible audacity to betray me again in the foulest manner possible ! You are the most miserable hypocrite, the most heartless scoundrel, I ever heard of !

In this there were distinct evidences of personal resentment ; jealousy prevailed over everything, and I took my cue accordingly.

‘ You will not believe me,’ I asseverated. ‘ On my hon—— by everything I hold sacred, I swear to you I would not have deceived you. Once rid of Miss Marchmont, I would have told you everything, I would have

humbled myself to the dust for forgiveness ; sooner than marry you with the deceit on my conscience, I would have risked your love, and that had grown very precious to me !

‘ Since when ? ’ Lisette broke in with a harsh laugh that grated horribly compared with my tones, which I had subdued down to a sad, hopeless key, meant to touch Blanche if possible. ‘ Since the other day, when you told me you cared not at all for madame ? ’

‘ What does this mean ? ’ interposed Blanche with surprise and hauteur ; ‘ are you in the habit of discussing with servants the measure of your assumed affection for me ? ’

‘ Certainly not, and that is a most infernal lie ! ’ I replied, for I knew Lisette could not prove what she had said. ‘ Lisette has shown me nothing but malicious impudence, ever since I declined the honour of making her my wife, which she was good enough to offer me. ’

‘ Are you out of your senses ? ’ exclaimed

Blanche, in tones of indignant surprise. Her usual self-possession had quite deserted her. 'Marry a servant ! what are you talking of ?'

I noticed Lisette beginning to look small and uncomfortable. 'It was my turn now, and, besides, she would have told everything, whatever I did or said, so I might as well discredit her testimony.'

'Yes,' I answered, 'it sounds unusual ; but such was what she proposed to me, and she said her lineage was as good as my own, that she was really the Comtesse de Bellagio, but her family had lost everything they had in the Revolution.'

'Did you tell all these lies ?' asked Blanche, turning round on Lisette, who did not reply. 'Pshaw !' she continued, addressing me ; 'her father was a *cordonnier* in a Brittany village, and two or three generations before him as well ! But how is it you ever talked about such things ?'

Lisette saw her opportunity, and put in her left.

‘Mistare Clifford has often kissed me and said he loved me, and I thought he meant it.’ This with a regretful sigh, as if I had broken her heart, and was the biggest villain living.

‘How common, how vulgar, how inexpressibly *low*!’ said Blanche, with as wry a face as if she were taking some nauseous medicine. ‘How could you do such a thing?’

‘Really, Blanche,’ I said, ‘you cannot pretend not to know that such things have been and always will be done, and are not looked on as such tremendous crimes either, although, of course, I am not proud of the achievement.’

‘I should have thought with Me it would have been different; I should have thought that after My society you would not have sought that of my maid, and actually kissed

her. How disgusting! To say nothing of your other hypocrisy and baseness!’

‘You would have tempted me like Miss Marchmont,’ Lisette put in, addressing me; ‘but I would not listen.’

‘That is an obvious untruth, Blanche,’ I interposed, before she could speak. ‘If you believe me at all, you must see that parting with Vera—with Miss Marchmont—and for the reason I did, I should be the last man in the world to saddle myself with Lisette or anyone else.’

‘But it is true, Miss Haviland!’ Lisette said vehemently; ‘I swear it to you.’

‘Hush, Lisette,’ said Blanche, and then, turning to me, she said: ‘Look at things how I will, your conduct seems more disgraceful at every turn. I have trusted you, and yet you seem to have lost no opportunity of behaving as badly as possible; you seem to have taken a delight in trying to humiliate

me ; all your sins have been the most deliberate cold-blooded treachery it is possible to conceive. What does it matter what Lisette says ? One thing more or less seems as nothing in this tissue of lies, this vile deceit with which you have rewarded my love for you !'

Blanche began to cry convulsively, not with a rain of easily-flowing tears like some women, but with hard, dry, tearless sobs that shook her frame, and seemed to be torn from her. Her proud nature must have been deeply affected to give way like this, and I felt her anguish keenly. Still, she took things rather too seriously.

Heedless of Lisette's presence, I threw myself on my knees in the most supplicating of attitudes, and I pleaded, in tones of the bitterest self-reproach :

' Listen to me, Blanche, I implore you ! Appearances are against me, but the circum-

stances are capable of explanation. In spite of what you consider my perfidy, I beg you to believe that I have grown to love you very dearly of late, and my parting with Miss Marchmont ought to be the best proof of my sincerity. Don't condemn me altogether; think the question over, and I believe you will admit that, though I am deeply to blame, I am not the perjured scoundrel I appear now.'

'The trouble you have caused me before is nothing to this blow,' Blanche answered, the words coming out in jerks in her agitation. 'The more I have forgiven and trusted you, the more you have played me false; but I will endeavour to be just, and give your conduct as favourable consideration as I can. In the meantime I would rather you avoided me, for the sight of you gives me nothing but pain. — As for you, Lisette,' she continued, 'I suppose I must consider you have

done me a service. Your conduct has been foolish and wicked, but as you are only young, I may overlook it if you behave better in the future.'

Blanche silenced Lisette, who was beginning to make all sorts of effusive protestations, with an imperious wave of her hand, and she took her departure.

'Blanche,' I said earnestly, 'honestly I regret what has passed more for your sake than my own. Make allowances if you can, and be merciful, for the sake of my love for you.'

'A pretty plea, truly,' she retorted energetically; 'if you had had the slightest regard for me, you would at least have been faithful to me, and not have caused me the indescribable pain I have had to suffer. Have you no heart, that you cannot realize what I endure when I find that all my affection has been lavished upon one whose

only thought was to betray me, and that when I forgave you and put my trust in you again, all this time you were carrying on a shameless intercourse, and sharing your love, as you call it, between me and a degraded woman, until you make me loathe myself when I remember your traitorous caresses ?

This was not a good time for me, evidently, so after murmuring something half inaudible about 'bitterly sorry' and 'forgiveness,' I made my escape.

What a blessing Blanche thinks and acts and speaks for herself! If she allowed her friends to take any active part in her affairs, they would probably have made things unpleasant for me. After all, it might have been worse ; I have managed to put a pretty fair complexion on my sins, and now I must see what I can do to pull things a little out of the fire.

Vera must not remain at Lambton an hour

longer than can be helped. She will do anything I ask her, and I will write and beg her to leave for town at once, and I think even Lisette will be puzzled there. She must write and tell me her address when she arrives, and I will take care Lisette does not have the supervision of the letter-bag the morning that missive arrives. I must explain my danger, and as what I want her to do will square so well with her own inclinations, there should be no difficulty in evading Lisette's arts, though if the latter makes inquiries at Lambton, the question of the date of Vera's leaving would be an awkward one to face ; but, after all, I did not guarantee her being anywhere in particular at the time of our scene this morning.

How Blanche will take things on consideration I cannot say ; I have very little hope, but I may as well try and come out as creditably as I can. By-the-bye, I will

write her a penitent note asking her to threaten Lisette with instant dismissal if she breathes a word on the subject ; for if I am a black sheep now, my reputation would be much enhanced if it became known that I was urging my suit on one woman, and an heiress to boot, while another was living with me as my wife. It will be better for Blanche, too, as a general knowledge of all the circumstances would be fearfully humiliating for her. So far, Lisette will have kept silence, because while she kept the secret she had power over me. I shall encounter her some time, I suppose, and though I am of a peaceable disposition, I am sure I could kill her and think it justifiable homicide.

CHAPTER XXVI.

The same day, later.

I DID meet Lisette this afternoon, after I had finished this journal and written my letters. Her appearance did not lead me to suppose she was much enjoying her revenge, for she had a woebegone and untidy appearance that contrasted strongly with her usual smart neatness. It softened me a little ; after all, she loved me. Still, my feelings and my tones were anything but affectionate as I accosted her.

‘ Well, Madame la Comtesse,’ I said bitterly, ‘ you are as false as your *soi-disant* title ! Are you satisfied with your morning’s work ?’

‘I told you I would expose you,’ she retorted angrily ; ‘and but that Miss Haviland is a fool, and you throw dust in her eyes, she should have cast you off. Pouf! like that’ —with an expressive gesture that Salvini need not have been ashamed of.

‘You reptile!’ I answered between my teeth. ‘And what good have you done? Directly Miss Haviland has got over her exasperation, I will see that you lose your situation, and you shall do me no more harm then. Your lying tongue may part us for a day or two, but your career is getting very short now, I can assure you.’

‘*N’importe*,’ she answered coolly ; ‘madame has forbidden me to mention the subject to her.’

‘A pity she didn’t this morning,’ I said, ‘then your mischief-making would have been prevented. You are happy now, I dare say ; you wanted my love, and you have earned my undying hatred.’

‘Oh, *mon Dieu* !’ Lisette replied, breaking down suddenly into an April shower of tears and sobs, ‘I am so miserable, *si desolée*. Pity me, my heart is breaking !’

‘What next ?’ I said, in amazement at the impudence of this *coup de théâtre*. ‘I am very likely to do that,’ I continued with irony. ‘I am surprised you don’t ask me to kiss you, to take you to my heart, to marry you, in short. Isn’t there any other trifling favour you would like me to do for you ? Pray mention it ; I shall be delighted to gratify your wishes.’

‘And I loved you so !’ Lisette went on between her sobs. ‘I would have given my life for you, and you hate me : it is cruel—I shall die !’

‘I suppose you will some time,’ I put in brutally ; ‘and I could wish that interesting event had taken place yesterday. When it does occur, you will die of *le spleen* because there is no more harm to do, no more evil to

work. You prated of your good mistress until your hypocrisy sickened me. Did you think of her feelings, did you spare her, when your venomous tongue was at work this morning ?’

‘No,’ Lisette answered, raising her head under the sting of my reproaches and facing me ; ‘but, all the same, I did save you both from an unhappy fate. I saved her from marriage to a — what you call rascal ; and you—you two would have been incompatibles, and you know it. Ah !’ she said, with a prodigious sigh, and then went on with passion, ‘if only I were her, my love should chain you to my side. I would worship you ; we should be joined in heart and spirit as well as in body. If you came to me to confess, I would love you all the more, in spite of everything, if you only loved me—if you were only mine.’

‘Which is never possible now, you may

easily imagine,' I answered coldly; 'and as I am only likely to make my position worse with Miss Haviland if anyone sees me talking to you, I may as well go.'

'You think so?' she replied, with a new light in her eyes which was not love, but a diabolical resolution. '*Qui vivra verra!* All my hopes are not dead yet. The work may be the more difficult, but I will try. I knew you would soon tire of that pale-faced chit, your Vera; and where Simpson failed, satiety helped me. I have separated you from Miss Haviland, I know, for ever, and there is a prospect for me yet. You laughed once when I spoke of marriage, as if you were a king and I a *cocotte*; and I have never forgiven it, even loving you as I do. You know my power already, but you think I can do no more. I will have you yet!'

'Yes, when the stars fall or I go mad,' I replied, with an incredulous laugh; 'and to

tell me that I, who hate you like poison for what you have done, shall ever become your husband is the height of absurdity !’

‘ So !’ she replied wearily, as if the conversation bored her. ‘ I am sorry to have turned you against me—it is misery—but destiny is stronger than I ; and it is but doing evil that good may come.’

‘ Is it ?’ I said pointedly, as the remembrance of all that rupture with Blanche meant to me forced itself on my mind. I put on a solemn, impressive manner. ‘ You may talk about destiny, but listen. You are a woman, and I won’t say everything to you that I would to a man, no matter how much I hate you ; but if you were the only woman on this earth, and I needed a woman’s companionship above everything—if it were to save my life—I would see you and myself in hell before I married you !’

I am not sure whether I attempted a digni-

fied exit when I said this, but no matter. As I record the interview, I feel ashamed of my language and the heroics I gave way to ; but one cannot always be answerable for things said in the heat of temper.

The fact that I have played for a big stake, and practically lost, troubles me far less than I should have imagined. After all, it is the trifles in life that are the worst, and a man of angelic disposition may get into a bad temper if his shaving-water is not at hand when it is wanted. ' Our only general ' may be discomposed by a beetle in the dark ; Napoleon might have dreaded the touch of a spider ; and my Lady Bountiful and Beneficent may fret and fume if costumes do not arrive in time for the matinée of the season and the command ball at Buckingham Palace.

We feel great troubles, of course, but they are soon mentally assimilated and reckoned with as a condition of our daily existence.

They do not prove that ever-recurring vexation that the details of life do. Edwin, *par exemple*, knows he is poor, and realizes it well; but he acquires a habit of mental somnolence, from which he is only aroused as he smokes the last of his bachelor cigars, or the rate-collector leaves the final notice; or Angelina, in the early days of matrimony, sees a love of a bonnet, and it goes to his heart to deny her after all the billing and cooing, when he has assured her that her every wish should be gratified, even at the cost of his heart's blood. It is, indeed, the pin-pricks, the little things, that annoy us; and no trouble, no sorrow, can long be so absorbing that we do not feel the petty annoyances that happen every day.

The next evening.

Well, after all, things might have been worse. I have lost Blanche finally, I suppose; but still she shows me such goodness and

consideration, that I feel not only profoundly grateful, but a bigger sense than ever of what a scoundrel I have been to her. Perhaps, after all, it is for the best. Blanche really knew so little of me and my real self that marriage would have been a rash experiment for her, and she will be happier without me for a husband. Unless we could have led the same life as we do now, which consists in my only seeing her at intervals, and for periods which are not long, but are often trying to me, for I never feel perfectly at home with her—our ideas and dispositions are so different—the chances of happiness would have been very slight.

When a man, a Bohemian by education and inclination, gets into certain selfish ways and grooves of his own, to marry a proud, particular, straitlaced woman, to be dependent on her, and, as she can't descend from her pedestal, to try to ascend to her level,

requires an effort far greater than my indolent temperament would have cared about; and while I should have been a source of grief and disappointment to Blanche, I am sure her perpetual inborn propriety — unlike mine, which is put on on occasions only—would have proved a confounded bore to me; and yet I love her, irrational as it sounds.

Blanche sent for me this morning, and I went with a comparatively light heart to hear my sentence. I knew the worst—Lisette had shot her bolt, and there are no more *affaires* of mine likely to crop up, search she never so diligently. *Ce n'est que le premier pas qui coûte*, and I had got that over yesterday.

Blanche had traces of tears in her eyes when I arrived, and she appeared not a little shaken by the revelation. I looked round anxiously to see if Lisette was within ear-shot; and Blanche, interpreting my looks, told me she had sent her on some errand,

from which she could not possibly get back for a considerable time.

‘Thank Heaven for that!’ I ejaculated without thinking; for I was prepared to eat any amount of humble pie, and it is grievous to one’s *amour propre* to do so in presence of a third person, especially one who may gibe at you for it afterwards.

‘I don’t see any reason for such particular fervour,’ Blanche remarked austere; ‘although, since you pointed it out to me, I have certainly noticed that Lisette has an objectionable talent in the way of inquisitiveness.’

‘Yes, and not only that,’ I replied clumsily, ‘for her espionage has been most annoying——’

‘Doubtless,’ interposed Blanche, with the ghost of a sneer.

‘But for amazing impudence as well. I met her yesterday, and she coolly informed

me that, whatever happened, I should be her husband. You smile, and no wonder, at the idea of my listening to such nonsense ; but she is a very different girl to the well-trained, well-behaved maid you think her. She avows her love for me, weeps violently, and looks like going into hysterics. I am obliged to calm her, for fear of a scene and a scandal.'

'You have only yourself to thank for it,' Blanche replied coldly. 'If men will indulge in such low amusements as making love to servants, even in jest, what can they expect? However, I will tell Lisette to cease this ridiculous behaviour, or she must leave me ; and I should be sorry for that, for she is a good girl, on the whole.'

'Yes ; but I want to point out to you,' I said impulsively, 'that Lisette has shown all this spite and malice against me simply and solely because I would have nothing to say to her pretensions, and she has represented

things in the worst possible light. Had she not spoken, and I had made the confession myself that I intended doing, you would not have thought so hardly of me.'

'What am I to think,' asked Blanche bitterly, 'of my intended husband being dependent on the goodwill of my maid?'

I discreetly answered nothing; and presently Blanche proceeded in her most judicial manner:

'I quite fail to see how the mere telling of such a wretched story can alter the hard facts. Either you did or you did not do certain things, and as you admit by your own confession that you did, it really makes very little difference to my mind whatever you intended, or say you intended, to have done afterwards. I cannot suppose you ever contemplated being so unutterably base as to marry me without first breaking off such a discreditable connection, and I must give you

whatever paltry credit attaches to that. But the fact remains, that while you are my acknowledged lover, while you visit my friends in that character, you are guilty of the basest treachery—you leave me to spend part of your time in the society of a woman who is a disgrace to her sex. I try to be charitable; but I feel thankful that you have not rewarded such an improper person for her deceit and perfidy to me by marrying her. But perhaps,' she continued, arching her eyebrows, 'I am overlooking a contingency: you may have meditated marrying her, and throwing me over.'

'Oh, Blanche dear,' I replied, 'you can't think that!'

'I fear I have been driven,' she replied pitilessly, 'to believe you capable of anything; but you will have every chance of gratifying any inclination you may have in that direction.'

‘ You judge too harshly,’ I pleaded. ‘ Make some little allowance for me.’

‘ I think I have done that to an unusual extent before now,’ she replied unrelentingly.

‘ Give me one more chance,’ I begged humbly, fighting against my death-warrant.

‘ I have endeavoured to be just,’ Blanche said with a haughty look and mien, like any Roman matron about to seal the gladiator’s fate with down-turned thumb. ‘ I have tried to look at your conduct from what I take to be a man’s point of view, and that code is elastic enough for men to be so bad that I wonder sometimes, with the patriarch of old, whether there can be ten, or even five, good men left. Judged by that standard even, your conduct appears abominably treacherous; for it is not usual, as far I can learn, for the biggest *roué* as a preparatory to marriage to make his future wife’s companion his mistress ! I have thought,’ Blanche continued,

‘that a woman who could so far lower herself as to consent to such a disgusting arrangement must be innately bad, and may have influenced you and tempted you; but surely you might have had some thought for me, and not have been so easily led astray.’

‘Poor little Vera!’ I thought, ‘my conscience acquits you of the slightest blame;’ but what use was it my defending her? I should only have irritated Blanche still further, and done myself and Vera no good. Still, I could not let her bear all the reproach.

‘No, Blanche, no,’ I said firmly; ‘think of me as badly as you will, but I should be an irredeemable scoundrel to put any of the blame on Miss Marchmont.’

‘You are very chivalrous,’ answered Blanche with a sneer; ‘she has every consideration shown her, while I—if you had determined to invent the most refined torture you could for me, my lot could not have

been harder. All your generosity and goodness and love have been lavished on her, and my share has been nothing but insult and humiliation. People envy me my position and my money ; but God knows I would give up all for a little happiness, and the fidelity you have shown her !'

Blanche burst into tears, and, hypocrite as I can be when necessary, I was acting no part when I flung myself down beside her, and answered in ardent, passionate tones :

'Blanche *darling*, forgive me, I implore you ! I am a cur to have caused you this pain, but I love you. I do love you with all my heart and soul. Why should I lie to you ? There is no one to come between us now. Forgive me, and give me back your love.'

I tried to take her hand, but she drew it away gently. She cried a few moments

longer, and then composed herself and turned to me, looking like a statue of Niobe.

She smiled faintly, and said :

‘ Bertie, you have always had my love—I have not been fickle, like you ; but it is too late now. Love without trust would hold out little hope of happiness, and I have been so disappointed in you I can never trust you again. You may think lightly of your sins, but if I were a man I could never be capable of such deceit, and I should have no self-respect if I thought of marriage with anyone whose principles would allow him to behave as you have done.’

‘ But, Blanche,’ I interposed eagerly, ‘ you can love me. Say it again, dearest.’

Half a loaf is proverbially better than no bread, and with such a powerful influence as love to aid me, I might yet work my way back to the old *entente cordiale*.

‘ You may believe I love you,’ answered

Blanche sadly ; ‘but you must hope nothing from that. I could not marry anyone I did not respect, and you have opened my eyes too rudely to the real nature of your character for me to be blind and go on believing in you any longer.’

‘Then you condemn me to despair,’ I said hopelessly.

‘I do ; I must,’ she answered with determination. ‘And whom have you to thank ? Is it my doing that this painful necessity is forced upon me ?’

Curiously enough, I derived more hope from these few words than anything. The self-assertiveness with which Blanche said, ‘I do ; I must,’ so different from her usual quiet power when she had made up her mind, seemed as if she was not sure of herself, as if, in fact, she was afraid of yielding to my solicitations ; and not only that, but taunting me with her decision being my fault then and

once or twice before, hinted strongly at that personal pique, that jealous womanly resentment, which I was so anxious to foster, rather than submit to her calm, unbiased, abstract judgment, measured by which my conduct was unpardonable.

A woman who is jealous, who is angry for her own sake, is much easier to manage than one who regulates her life and passions by the question of principle, of right and wrong as opposed to her feelings and inclinations, which are the guiding star of ninety-nine out of every hundred.

‘I have repented sincerely,’ I answered earnestly, feeling my way. ‘I have put an end to what was the *raison d’être* of my indictment. I have done everything I could to make reparation. Is there no hope for me? Can I never look forward to regaining your favour? I would do anything to prove myself a little worthy of you. Try me, dearest, only try

me, and let your heart speak for me. I would undo the past if I could, for your sake as well as my own. Do you think it was nothing to me to wound you? Do you think I ever had so little esteem for you that I was not sorry—bitterly sorry—for your lacerated feelings? I am not altogether bad.'

'You might have thought of that,' Blanche replied with asperity, 'when you entered upon a course that was not only a disgrace to you, but a sin against me. A hundred years of unwavering devotion could not wipe out the memory of the injury you have done me, and the deceit you have practised. There are some things it is impossible to forget; and to find out, after all, that my idol had feet of clay, and was worse than the generality of men, was an overwhelming blow to me!'

Here again seemed needless energy. Blanche would not have indulged in such

a tirade some time ago. The difference was subtle, perhaps; but I, who had studied her so long and completely, and knew the significance of every *nuance* of tone and manner, gained hopes—very slight, it is true, but still hopes—from this change in her demeanour. I did not press the question. I had sown the seed on, let me hope, good ground, and it must take root and germinate before I could expect any good result.

I stood meekly silent, bowing submissively to my sentence, and presently Blanche resumed :

‘There is another point about which I wish to speak. I feel I may be doing you an injustice. As my affianced husband, you have been prevented from—or shall I say you have neglected?—following your profession. Now that your hopes are at an end, I should like you to tell me how your pecuniary affairs stand.’

‘You surely don’t imagine,’ I said indignantly, ‘that I could accept assistance from you!’

‘I did not mean that,’ Blanche interrupted with dignity; ‘although, as I had always intended you to share my money freely, I do not see why I should not help you if I choose, in spite of your scruples. You have been punished sufficiently in losing me, and I shall certainly take care you are not reduced to extremities.’

‘I can’t tell you,’ I said; ‘it would be humiliating. I cannot beg from one whom I have wronged so deeply.’

‘Don’t look at it in that light,’ she answered sharply. ‘Why can’t I assist you the same as I would anyone in trouble?’

‘Blanche,’ I exclaimed fervently, ‘you are an angel of goodness!’

‘There is no occasion for all this enthusiasm,’ she replied in cold, practical tones,

which damped the ardour of my protestations ;
'just tell me how you stand.'

Reluctantly I admitted that my cigar bill more than absorbed the whole of my income, and then Blanche said :

'I was not going to offer you money : you don't give me credit for much tact ; but I have a good deal of influence, and if the Radicals have not quite done away with all the comfortable berths, I am sure I can get you a good appointment.'

Of course I thanked her effusively, although the idea of anything like regular work was appalling ; still, I must do something or starve, and really it was very good of her. How many women would have exhibited such nobility of character ?

'In the meantime,' Blanche continued, 'you will stay on here, I hope. We can be friends.'

'No, I must go,' I said decidedly ; 'I

cannot stay on that footing—I love you too well. Besides, I shall be here under false pretences.'

'Oh, very well,' responded Blanche, evidently vexed at not getting her own way, which, in common with lots of people, she is very fond of having. 'I suppose, now I have released you, you want to go to that Marchmont creature!'

'Indeed, Blanche, I don't!' I exclaimed, with more virtuous indignation than circumstances warranted, for I had to see Vera once more. 'What an infamous scoundrel you must take me to be! Don't be unjust. Think a little better of me than that!'

'Why not stay, then?' she asked in a tone of pique. 'You have only yourself and me to please; but, of course, I count for nothing.'

'If you want me, Blanche dear,' I replied affectionately, 'of course I will stay.'

'As it is,' she explained with trembling

lip, 'I don't know how I shall tell Mrs. Fawcett the truth.'

'Keep it secret, then,' I interposed, thinking that the ostensible preservation of the *status quo ante*, as the diplomatists say, would be favourable to my plans.

'Oh, Bertie, you never thought what I have to bear, or you wouldn't have behaved as you did.'

Bitter tears rolled down her cheeks, and my feelings were too forcible for expression. If I could have given myself a thoroughly good kicking, I am sure it would have relieved me beyond description.

'Blanche darling, *don't!*' I said, with feelings of deepest remorse. 'I am punished indeed now. Wretch as I am, do let me try and console you. If I could have foreseen this moment, I would have shot myself before I would have made you suffer like this!'

The once imperious beauty allowed me to put my arm round her waist, and she abandoned her head to my breast for a little while, and I kissed away the precious tears shed for my misdeeds.

‘You must hear me, dearest!’ I cried passionately. ‘When I see you distressed like this I am cut to the heart. I love you so much now that I would gladly die to save you a moment’s sorrow; and I have inflicted on you the keenest humiliation. What you feel I endure with double intensity.’

Blanche disengaged herself gently from my embrace, and asked wonderingly:

‘You say you love me now—what do you mean? Did you not always love me?’

‘Yes, Blanche,’ I answered stoutly; ‘but you have grown inexpressibly dear to me of late, because you have been so much more lovable, so tender, and more like other women; and I thought you cold and proud

and hard, or I would never have grieved you.'

'I believe you are right,' she replied. 'When we were estranged about Mrs. Nelson, I realized then how much you were to me; it humbled my pride in myself, and I felt I ought to show you more affection, and how, oh! how has it been requited?'

There were strong symptoms of more tears, so I pleaded earnestly:

'Dear Blanche, do give me a little hope. Don't say that just as we are beginning to be really happy, and to appreciate one another's love—don't say that just as paradise is opening before us, everything is to be at an end. Darling, don't!'

'You tempt me,' she replied, with her old propriety coming between us again; 'but I cannot forget, I cannot be false to myself; but some day perhaps—— At all events, we will continue outwardly on the

same terms until I can better bear the pain of explanation.'

To say any more would not only have been bathos, but a blunder as well, so I left her, very well satisfied on the whole with the result. She seemed *difficile* on the question of marriage; but, after all, the ostensible maintenance of our understanding is a very great point in my favour.

There is no particular credit due to me that I can see, only Blanche's love has fought for me, although, perhaps, my own has acted as a lever as well. Anyhow, I have a pleasant feeling of security; Lisette may go hang, and the semi-reconciliation that has taken place between us makes me so charitable that if Blanche wishes to retain her services, I will not offer a suggestion against it; nay, it will even be a satisfaction to pay her out by showing Blanche much affection under her watchful eye. I am really

fond of Blanche, I can't help it, and I feel now that if the time were to come over again, neither Mrs. Nelson nor Vera herself even should have tempted me.

CHAPTER XXVII.

The Temple.

I WAS bound to be on my best behaviour as far as Blanche was concerned ; but at the same time I could not part from little Vera without seeing her once, especially as she had written me a piteous letter rather complaining of her unceremonious departure from Lambton, so I got Meredith, my friend here, to send me a tremendously business-like epistle which insisted peremptorily on my immediate attendance in town on matters connected with my father's estate. It was such an imposing communication that it would have impressed even suspicious Lisette,

and as for Blanche, she merely pronounced it an awful bore, and after giving me sundry commissions for the Army and Navy and Whiteley's, she thought no more of it until I said good-bye to her.

I am not at all sure in my own mind what her sentiments are towards me. I know she loves me, but I fear sometimes that her dignity and self-love are outraged beyond repair, and that all I shall ever get is a kindly interest, which is as a stone when you want bread. I know marriage with her would mean a painful amount of *ennui* for me ; but still I love her, and I would put up with it ; and strong-minded as she is, when she tastes the rapture of sweetest kisses, and all love's tenderness, she must descend from her lofty standpoint, and come down to my level a little. But I have not got her yet.

I saw Lisette once or twice before I left

Woodsleigh, and though I should be sorry to say she was going out of her senses, there was a strange fixed, dangerous look in her eyes, and she was wrapped in a gloomy self-absorption, as you might fancy anyone meditating and brooding over a crime. I told Blanche what I thought, but she laughed at my ideas and said she had noticed nothing.

I have seen the last of Vera, I suppose, and our parting is not a pleasant episode to look back upon. Partings seldom are, but this was peculiarly painful, as Vera was going to immure herself as it might be in a tomb. If I had followed my own inclinations, I should not have seen her again; these scenes are harrowing to one's feelings, and while they do no earthly good, stir up all sorts of painful reflections.

Vera had established herself at Kilburn, well beyond where Maida Vale with its

Semitic colony ends—Brondesbury perhaps I had better call it. She had grown virtuous and proper *à merveille*, and would not hear of my coming to stay with her; in fact, she now passed as Miss Herbert, as quiet and unassuming a name as she could have chosen. In addition, after my first visit, I was to call no more at the house where she was lodging; but we made appointments to meet in the Park and Kensington Gardens.

How strange it seemed arranging rendezvous with her before she was going to disappear into the cold gloom of some establishment conducted on semi-monastic lines! It gave me a disagreeable sensation every time I met her, as you might experience on going to see some wretched criminal under sentence of death.

This practical renunciation of the world, the flesh and the devil no doubt is extremely praiseworthy, but it strikes me as

a mistake in many ways. Poor human nature must have broken every tie, have lost everything it loves, before it can be content with mere Christian sympathy, and be comforted by religion after the tender ministrations of loving friends and relations.

I tried, not very hard certainly, to turn Vera from her resolution, but she was firm. I pointed out how she had enough to live quietly on anywhere she pleased, without committing any sin, which argument she rebutted by pleading her extreme loneliness and remorse, and said she would at least have companionship in what she proposed to do.

I said that my marriage with Blanche was extremely uncertain; but then I could not undertake to marry Vera, although there was always a prospect, if I obtained the appointment Blanche had promised to try and secure for me. But the idea of the good work

seemed to afford her so much satisfaction and comfort, that I did not press the question as I might have done under other circumstances.

On the occasion of one of our meetings I besought Vera for the sake of her feelings to let me go away without any actual parting ; but she clung to me in terror at the thought, and pleaded so earnestly that she might know when she was seeing the last of me, that I gave way. Vera agreed with me that prolonging the time only seemed to be increasing the torture, so we arranged that yesterday should be our last day together, and at night we should say farewell for ever, a melancholy prospect which filled us with gloomy anticipations.

I might and I did love Blanche, but my whole soul was full of intense pity for Vera, who had sacrificed so much for my sake ; and, had I not been endowed by Nature with a mind which under the most trying circum-

stances always coldly studies the consequences, I might easily have been led into making her happy.

The eventful day came only too soon. Vera had promised to spend the whole of it with me, and we betook ourselves to Regent's Park; but our hearts were too full for much conversation, especially in the broad light of day, and our feelings intolerable.

When evening came, we dined at a restaurant not far from Portland Road Station; but the dinner was a farce, the chianti seemed the most vinegary of clarets, and the champagne might have been the sacramental cup, with such solemnity did we imbibe it. Then, as the park was closing, we turned into the Inner Circle, and there, as far removed from London turmoil as if we had been in the Hollow Plantation at Woodsleigh, the real bitterness of separation began.

'Bertie darling,' Vera said in tremulous

tones, clinging to my arm the while as if she could never let go, 'we are told there is a punishment for our sins hereafter. Do you believe it? Can you imagine anything worse than this?'

'I don't know what to believe, dearest,' I replied solemnly. 'One hears so many different opinions nowadays; but I think the doctrine of eternal punishment is getting less and less credited. Let us hope so. We are taught that the Almighty is merciful, and that He would inflict on us worse tortures than our own feelings bring us, I can hardly believe. But we are bringing this on ourselves. Be persuaded, dear one, and abandon the idea of the religious house; there is no special mandate from Providence to bury yourself there. Why not remain as you are? I will not perjure myself to Blanche, and I will not tempt you to sin; but I could reconcile it with my conscience and my duty

to her, if I should become her husband, to come and see you sometimes as a friend.'

'No, Bertie,' Vera answered hurriedly, in tones of alarm, 'because I could not avoid the sin of always loving you, and friendship between us two would be a hollow mockery. I hope by hard work, earnest prayer, and a constant contemplation of misery and wretchedness worse than my own, to put you out of my heart in time, or, at least, to think of you without passion. And in that only shall I find peace; and I must have some hope, something to look forward to in the next world. Let me implore you to think of the hereafter yourself!'

'Yes, dear,' I said, cutting her short, for I did not at all relish the impending sermon; 'but do remember that your landlady, with the instincts of her class, is sure to think you are out "keeping company with your young man," so you are determined to be home by

half-past nine, which reduces the time at our disposal to just half an hour. I am in no humour for thinking of anything good to-night ; let us talk of something else.'

'What is there to talk about,' she answered wearily, 'but vain regrets? Can I discuss conic sections or thorough bass when my heart is breaking?—and yet prudence, conscience, everything tells me I must give you up.'

A quarter of an hour soon passed like this, and Vera begged me to say good-bye, and then accompany her as far as the Outer Circle, where she wished me to leave her, so that she could compose her feelings before setting off for home. No thought of Blanche's strictures crossed my mind as I held Vera in one long clinging embrace which we were loath to end ; and then we walked in silence to where she was anxious to be alone.

'One last kiss, *darling!*' she gasped with

tearful intensity ; and, taking a hurried glance round to see there were no observers, I gave her it.

I turned away, and walked a few yards, but I found on looking back Vera had not moved. I went on a little distance further, but more slowly ; she was still there. I hurried back, and found her in such distress as I hope never to witness again. She was clinging to the railings, violent sobs racking her little form with convulsive agony. Tears were coursing down her cheeks and dripping on to the ground, and she could not speak for a time for her paroxysms of weeping.

‘ Hush, dearest, hush !’ I said anxiously. ‘ Do try and calm yourself, or I will not let you go.’

‘ Let me die !’ Vera answered in heart-wrung tones between each burst of sobbing ; ‘ I can’t bear it.’

‘ Poor little woman,’ I thought sadly, ‘ what

is to be done with her ?' And then a minute's reflection suggested a remedy I had found useful before, viz., an anticlimax.

'I can't leave you now,' I said decidedly ; 'it would be inhuman of me, and I can't, darling, for your sake.'

'I am better now,' she answered feebly ; 'let me go.'

'No,' I replied firmly, 'I will not let you go like this.'

Vera let me lead her into the Marylebone Road, and a swift hansom soon deposited us at Edgware Road Station, where we made for the refreshment room. By this time she had dried her tears, and looked fairly presentable. I persuaded her to drink some brandy, which did her good ; then I put her into the hansom again and sent her home, promising to come for her in the morning. Afterwards I comforted myself with much whisky and tobacco.

So this morning, discreetly leaving my cab

in the main road, I walked up the street in which she was staying, and, reaching the house, asked to see her.

‘Miss Herbert told me to say, sir, she was particularly engaged, and could see no one,’ was the reply ; but, secure in my faith in my prescription, I persisted, and said I wished to speak to her on a matter of great importance.

Miss Herbert would see me ; would I come in ? I did, and waited until Vera made her appearance. Her face told tales of many tears and weary, sleepless hours ; but she looked much better than last night. She was reluctant, but at last she consented to come out with me ; and once having given way, she slipped on hat and jacket with a celerity I wish many of my lady friends would imitate, and we set off together.

‘You mean it for kindness, Bertie, but you’d better not have come back.’

'This was the burden of her lamentations, and in spite of all my assurances that I could not bear to leave her distressed as she was, and that I came again to comfort her and soften the blow a little, she only reiterated :

'You'd better not have come back.'

However, it was a fine bright morning, and our hansom was soon bowling along West-End Lane, then across Finchley Road, and so on to breezy Hampstead. Vera could not resist the exhilaration of the fresh air, and the drive, and her spirits came back, and we chatted and laughed like two children until her cure seemed complete. Then back again by a devious route, and as we were driving through a quiet road in St. John's Wood, I kissed her once quietly, but registering a mental vow that this was good-bye. We reached and drove along the highroad until nearly at her turning, when I alighted, assisted her to the pavement, and shook

hands with as much fervour as an Englishman usually exhibits in a busy thoroughfare, saying, with much emphasis, as I did so :

‘ Now mind, Vera, if you change your mind, or ever want me or my assistance, you can always rely upon me. A letter or a wire to my chambers will find me. Remember, dearest, and good-bye !’

She gripped my hand hard in silence, then released it, and set off for her lodgings, not even pausing to look behind her. I watched her to the corner, and then turned to a shop window to hide my emotion. My feelings included a good deal more pity and tenderness for her than Blanche would have approved of.

So far my prescription, and I am sure it was better than letting Vera be torn with anguish last night, when she was in such a state of excitement that it would have been hard to foresee the consequences. Of course

she would cry bitterly when she got home, but then the edge, so to speak, would have been taken off her wretchedness by the previous night. Violent grief, strung up to the highest point at the moment of parting, well accepted and understood, and then assuaged for the time, cannot get up the same enthusiasm, cannot reach the same height again, and this is what I was anxious to accomplish.

I retired quietly back to my chambers, and I have felt a sadder, if not a wiser, man the rest of this day; but now I have unburdened my conscience to these pages I feel better, and I am going to look round some of my old haunts, where anything in the shape of blue devils or good resolutions is quickly exorcised.

Blanche has written once, but her letter contains far more expressions of friendship than love, and the most sanguine of mortals

could not derive much hope from it; so to avoid a miserable evening, I will hie me to those resorts where the wit deserves the name, if keen and caustic, where cynicism reigns supreme, and the luckless wight who lost his temper at a jest would be laughed out of existence.

That region I should call Bohemia; not the dirty, uncomfortable habitat of the unshaven pot-boiling painter, whose filthy paint-marked coat is redolent of beer and coarse tobacco, but amongst men of letters, smart actors waiting their chances, briefless barristers like myself, and all the *omnium gatherum* of culture and cleverness that are to be found every night from beyond the Griffin to the Garrick Club.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

Woodsleigh Towers.

I HAVE got my wet clothes off; a doctor has been sent for, and I am sitting by a blazing fire in my dressing-gown, with a huge steaming tumbler of some watery compound of claret and sugar and spice, and all that is not nice, which I am going to throw away presently, and then ring for some cayenne pepper and brandy. It occurs to me to note down what has happened while it is still vividly fresh in my memory.

I got through Monday night without impairing my constitution more than usual, and came down here on Tuesday. Blanche

greeted me kindly, but with no particular warmth; and when at my solicitation she kissed me, there was no heart in the embrace.

The principal topic of conversation was a water-party to-day at the lower lake at Gladeside, which is part of the demesne of the Towers. An unusually large pike had been seen by one of the keepers, and it was for the destruction of this monster that our expedition was planned. We were to drive over in the morning, and lunch or picnic in the boats, and whoever succeeded in hooking the big fish was to have a prize. Young Fawcett, of course, was to bring his camera, and take some impossible photograph or other.

‘Clifford, you’ll come, old man, of course,’ said somebody.

‘And Miss Haviland,’ chimed in somebody else, while a meaning smile went round that

was not warranted by facts, if only people had been acquainted with them.

Miss Haviland, being in a remarkably good humour, consented for once, and we went on talking over the details, and discussing the ultimate destination of Monsignore Pike, regardless of the ancient advice to catch your hare before submitting it to culinary operations.

This morning came with its usual punctuality, but looked distinctly unpromising with gray skies, autumnal chilliness, and a drizzling rain. There was a mist prevailing, and, as someone remarked, it was a perfect suicide's day. Popular opinion was strongly in favour of leaving the pike to his destiny until to-morrow; but the younger and wilder spirits, headed by Harry Fawcett, saw every hope of the clouds breaking, and rushed off to consult an old gardener who had the reputation of weather-wisdom, and whose imagina-

tion, stimulated no doubt by sundry bribes, prophesied something wonderful in the way of fine weather. So they carried their point, and we started off to drive the few miles that separated us from the two lakes.

The one we were bound for was of large extent and great depth. It was surrounded at the lower end by a belt of trees, over which the sky on our arrival looked so dark and threatening that, had I been an energetic, authority-assuming individual, I should certainly have tabooed anything but an instant return home. Any mild suggestions of the kind were silenced by ridicule and the appearance of a piece of blue sky about the size of a pocket-handkerchief, which only threw into greater relief the black gloom of the southern heavens. We had not been on a fishing expedition for some time, and the wild delight some people take in 'boating,' which they consider consists in nearly up-

setting the craft by rocking it, and pulling with first one scull and then the other, is worthy of any Thamesian 'Arry.

There was some little delay in shipping the provisions and wine in the different boats, which were hauled up on rollers on an inclined plane inside the boathouse by ropes and tackle. They were launched in turn without any mishap, the women shrieking a little as each one was lowered gently down and took the water.

It is needless to specify all the party. Our boat—one of the two best—contained Mrs. Fawcett and her *cavalier servente* for the time being, Blanche and myself, Jim Sandilands and Sydney Mainwaring, each with his respective muffin as the Canadians say. The last two took double sculls, and we sailed away serenely for the centre of the lake, the post of honour which had been assigned to our boat. We had no need to anchor; for

there was little or no current, and we got out our tackle and fished with that enthusiasm that dilettante anglers generally exhibit for the first half-hour or so.

It had been arranged that we should spend some time in pursuit of the wily pike before luncheon, so as to give us an appetite, and then that the different parties should close up, and we should feed in company. *L'homme propose, mais Dieu dispose.*

We had been at it about three-quarters of an hour with no result, and the interest was visibly on the wane. Furtive glances strayed wistfully under the thwarts in the direction of certain hampers, through which an occasional gleam of gold foil appeared and suggested pleasant memories of *les veuves Clicquot* and *Pommery*. Someone in the second boat was attempting a Venetian barcarolle, which sounded very incongruous, as well as uncondusive to our pursuit; for

who ever heard of a pike with a musical ear?

The others were absorbed in themselves or their occupation ; but I looked upwards, and there just above us was an evil-looking cloud of portentous blackness. A warning was just going to issue from my lips, when there was a vivid flash of lightning, followed by a rolling peal of Titanic thunder.

Instantly there was confusion, alarmed exclamations from the women, a hurried drawing in of lines ; and suddenly, as Sandilands was springing from the bow to the stroke thwart, there was a grating crash, and in a moment, it seemed, the boat was half full of water, so rapidly did it pour through the fracture.

Everyone shouted at once, it is impossible to say what, in the *mêlée* that occurred. I called out, ‘ Stuff something into the leak !’

but it was too late, the rowlocks were close to the water. No one thought of hailing the other boats; they were too far off, and the danger was imminent.

The events of those few seconds are firmly imprinted on my mind. No time for prayers, I thought, as with a grim, set face I tore off my coat and kicked off my tennis shoes, which I was luckily wearing. I instinctively made my way towards Blanche, who, like the others, was standing up in the now fast-disappearing boat.

‘Keep *cool*, and I will save you!’ I said in painfully intense tones.

Blanche was calm, and was facing death with a proud dignity that became her well, so different to the shrieks and prayers and sobs of the other women, who were clutching convulsively at anyone who happened to be nearest. Poor wretches! I had very little hope for them, and I knew it would be a

very hard fight for me if I managed to save Blanche at all.

I waited a moment that seemed a century, until I had room to strike out; for the others were beating the water frantically, making little whirlpools, and spoiling what little chance they had of being saved. The lightning was playing around us, and the thunder pealing continuously; the scene would have been a fit subject for a canto of Dante's 'Inferno.'

Blanche was keeping cool splendidly, and her clothes buoyed her up. I avoided the other kicking, struggling wretches; and while swimming to her, I raised myself once in the water and shouted, 'Help!' with a vigour that made it heard above the thunder.

All this takes ten times the time it happened in to describe. I reached Blanche's side as she was beginning to sink. I had never attempted to save anyone from drown-

ing before, and I did not know what was best, but I whispered hoarsely :

‘Lie flat on your back, and I will support your head. Courage, *darling* !’

She smiled faintly, and did as I told her ; but it was no use at all, she was swallowing water and gasping for breath.

‘Seize the back of my waistcoat ; keep away from me as far as you can,’ I said eagerly, as I saw how the former plan failed ; ‘and just keep your head above water.’

I was getting flurried with anxiety, and had no time for politeness or endearments.

Blanche clutched convulsively, and, Heaven be thanked ! got hold about the middle of my back. It was comparatively easy now for her to get air to breathe, while I swam at right angles to her, carefully keeping my balance with my hands, and striking out with my legs as vigorously as I dared, for fear of entangling myself in her skirts.

It may be an easy matter for a proficient, but I was anything but that; and I was hampered by my clothes, and out of condition as well, besides which Blanche was a fine woman.

That minute or two seemed an eternity to me as I swam on steadily, setting my teeth and straining my muscles, but I was fast becoming exhausted.

The time came when I knew I could hold out no longer. Strange lights were in my eyes, and strange sounds in my ears. My breath came in quick short sobs whenever I could get my head above water; and I was trying to think of a prayer as well as my bursting heart would let me. I had heard or seen nothing of our surroundings; I had been concentrating all my energies upon my work, knowing I had plenty before me, when I looked up in despair, and there—oh, blessed sight!—were the other two boats almost

within a length of me. One supreme effort, to which my breathless body and worn-out muscles nobly responded, and strong arms were lifting us over the side to safety, and what was more to me, the end of this fearful struggle.

I suppose I must have fainted or done something idiotic, for I remember no more until I came to my senses as we were being driven swiftly homewards. Those of us who were half-drowned had been restored to consciousness at the keeper's cottage ; but as the accommodation was not only indifferent, but very limited, and they could not revive me, it was decided to drive home as fast as possible, as my condition caused great anxiety.

I came back to myself with a scalding throat ; for they had been pouring brandy down it wholesale, and, I suppose, the jolting of the waggonette and the fresh air revived me. Blanche, pale, and looking very much

upset, had her eyes fixed on me with a tender concern, and she uttered an exclamation of delight when I came out of my stupor. The others were closely wrapped up, silent, and afraid to speak, as if the nearness of death had very much sobered them. Still, I learnt that everyone had been saved. The kicking, fluttering division had been fished up somehow or other, and my swimming with Blanche had carried us farther away, and we had been the last to be rescued.

Arriving at the Towers I was not allowed to talk, and was hurried up to my room, where a fire was hastily lit. Some of the men accompanied me, but I declined bed, saying I was all right ; and Fawcett, the irrepressible, lamented as he was leaving the room :

‘ Now, if I could only have got a negative of you Johnnies as the boat was sinking, I wouldn’t have minded a wetting.’

‘Get out, you heartless scoundrel!’ I exclaimed, laughing. ‘Nero fiddling at the conflagration of Rome was a philanthropist compared to you!’

There is a knock at my door. I rise to open it. Lisette stands there with a pale, haggard, scared face.

‘Miss Haviland’s love,’ she says in tremulous tones, her teeth chattering as if she had seen a ghost, ‘and she is better now. Will you go and see her, if you feel able to?’

I said I would come, and she departed.

Blanche wants to thank me, I suppose, for saving her life. I hate being thanked! You have to swallow all the flattery, and you can only listen in a shamefaced sort of way, and deprecate the praise that is bestowed on you. Still, I must go, and I will lock this volume up; my head feels a little bit queer and uncertain.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A few days later.

WHAT a nuisance writing in bed is ! and yet I must do something, for the doctor will not let me see anyone for more than ten minutes together ; and it is a positive relief to write if one wants to talk and cannot. I am not to mention the accident. It is annoying, for I cannot hear half the details I want to ; but still I have learnt enough to wake and find myself famous. I am the hero of the hour, and I have the consolation, if it is one, of knowing that bulletins as to my condition have been issued two or three times a day for

the last two days, and awaited anxiously by *tout le monde* of Woodsleigh.

It seems, as far as I can gather from Fawcett, who—the doctor's orders to the contrary notwithstanding—will persist in eulogizing my bravery, and calling me a splendid fellow, that the occupants of the other boats were intent on fancied bites or flirtation when the thunderstorm came and monopolized all their attention, so that they failed to notice our *contretemps*; and that, had it not been for my calling for help, we might have drowned, for all the assistance they would have rendered us.

‘So noble of you, old man!’ Fawcett declared with energy, ‘when everyone else was only thinking “*sauve qui peut*,” to remember them, and, by Jove! they are grateful, I can tell you; and if it wasn't for old Beveridge, the doctor, they would have come up in a posse to thank you. As it is, if they don't

give you a piece of plate, or an illuminated address on vellum, I shall be surprised. Happy thought ! If I had only got that negative of you all drowning, how well a print would have looked stuck on it !

‘ *Credat Judeus !* ’ I replied feebly. ‘ If you, or they, or anybody believe that, when I bellowed for assistance, I thought of anyone besides myself and Blanche Haviland, you may write me down an ass at once, and yourselves too, for that matter. Self-preservation is at the bottom of many a belauded action. For goodness’ sake sit on the plate and address idea, if it isn’t a flight of your own fervid imagination ! ’

‘ Well, you may say so, ’ he replied, evidently disappointed at my cold reception of his enthusiasm, ‘ but they’ll never believe it. Then, look at your heroic rescue of Miss Haviland ! The other chappies were floundering about helplessly, and you kept her up until you

fainted from exhaustion when we dragged you in, and you hadn't another ounce in you! There's nothing will meet the case but the Humane Society's medal.'

'Gracious heavens!' I groaned. 'Put me in the pillory at once!'

Just then the doctor came in, for which I was not at all sorry; for the presence of a frivolous young fellow like Fawcett, full of life and animal spirits, is trying to an invalid; and the swim with Blanche, or something, has given me a fearful twisting. The doctor fidgets me a bit, and then leaves me in peace.

I have a dim recollection of what occurred when I went down to see Blanche the other afternoon. She was lying on a couch, looking as if water *ad libitum* had disagreed with her very badly indeed; but what she lacked in appearance she certainly made up for in affection, for she made me kiss her repeatedly,

calling me her darling, her brave preserver, and all sorts of endearing names.

Then I lost control of my voice, I became maudlin and cried, my head was going round and round; and they tell me since that I fell across her in a dead faint. I despise myself, but everyone thinks the world of me for it.

After that I have very faint impressions of inquisitive people bothering about my pulse, and pestering me to drink things when I only wanted to be let alone, and indistinct murmurs, such as, 'Inflammation of the brain' — 'Mind and body overtaxed' — 'Dr. So-and-so, a specialist in these cases.'

I am really a celebrity in a small way, and that ought to advance me in Blanche's favour; although just now, except when someone comes and stirs me up, I feel very little interest in her, or my prospects, or anything. What a curious thing illness is!

It makes you rise above ordinary considerations, or, perhaps I had better say sink below them, for a wrinkle in your pillow causes you more annoyance than all the troubles that have bothered you in health.

Presently the doctor, an old man, comes in again, and says soothingly in a tone that irritates me, as if he were Forbes Winslow talking to a 'violent' patient :

' My young friend, you seem to take a great interest in that—er—manuscript volume, in which you have been writing so industriously. Hum ! I fancy if I were to read it, I should find the explanation of a good deal that has puzzled me about your case, if, as I—ah—er—guess, it is your diary.'

' Very likely you might, doctor,' I replied laconically, determined not to gratify his curiosity.

' It is not my—ah—province,' he continued, with a feeble attempt at Wimpole

Street pomposity, 'to inquire into the consciences as well as the—ah—bodily health of my patients, though I am often the recipient of confidences that would be better fitted for the ear of—ah—a spiritual adviser; but I must say that your constitution exhibits a lack of the recuperative power that I should have expected from a man of your physique, and this feature points to a career of—ahem—dissipation, which I cannot but deplore, and which I would earnestly advise you to cease, not only for your bodily but your spiritual welfare.'

'Look here, doctor,' I replied, my gorge rising at this with the natural impatience of an invalid, 'you have saved me from a serious illness, I understand. Your advice for the body is, I have no doubt, beyond praise, and I beg of you to confine yourself to that. It is a very simple syllogism. I am a barrister, and if I attempted the func-

tions of a solicitor, I should not only be presuming, but I should probably be unsuccessful as well. If the Reverend Mr. Transept attempted to prescribe for your patients, you would naturally resent it; therefore, if your art should fail, *ne sutor ultra crepidam*; but let the parson come and do his worst !'

Mr. Beveridge retired discomfited, muttering and shaking his head.

After a time Blanche arrived in state, as it were, and with some fear and trembling lest it should be considered a breach of decorum to visit me in my bedroom, although she stuck resolutely to her own standard of right and wrong, and would yield to no one when she had made up her mind; but I fancied it was her awakened love for me that made her diffident about the proprieties. This was the first visit she had been permitted to pay me, lest I should be agitated

by the remembrance, and also, presumably, by the excitement of seeing my love.

Could I help pretending to be very bad indeed, and so weak that Blanche had to make all the running? I was pale and ghastly in appearance; no make up could have been better for the part.

‘My poor Bertie,’ she said pityingly, ‘you do look ill! I am sorry for you!’

Then she stooped and arranged my pillows, and laid a cool—at one time I should have said cold-blooded—hand on my forehead.

I opened my eyes feebly, as if it required a tremendous effort, and looked fondly at her. She read my meaning quickly, and stooping again, kissed me as lightly and daintily as if I were the Sleeping Beauty.

Now, I thought, I must try and enlist her sympathies. If it did no permanent good, at all events, I should get petted, for which operation I have a great weakness, in which

I firmly believe a great many men share, only they won't confess it, because they think it looks unmanly. *Pour moi*, I ought to have been a Mahometan. If I had the prospect of a heaven, with myriads of moon-faced houris to be perpetually caressing me, and ministering to my wants, I should be a much warmer advocate of religion than I am.

'Thank you,' was my acknowledgment ; but no one, except a woman in love, or an accomplished lip-reader, could have understood.

Then I pretended to muster a little more energy, and said in weak, faltering accents :

'Please, dear, sit beside me ; I have longed for your coming. Do hold my hand.'

I smile grimly as I write, it sounds so foolish ; but it was highly effective, for the statuesque Blanche knelt down beside the bed, and took my hand, which had acquired

a very nice, pale, interesting transparency, and was an accessory not to be lightly valued. She kissed it, and surely those were a few warm tears that dropped upon it.

‘My poor Bertie,’ she murmured in affectionate tones, ‘to think you should have suffered all this for me. You risked your life doubly; first to save me, and then again in this illness. How can I ever thank or repay you?’

I could have told her a very simple recompense she could make me, but no, I was too weak and ill; a proposition of marriage would have been too speedy convalescence. Perhaps I am a brute, but I did enjoy seeing Blanche at a disadvantage, as it were. I had been the recipient of so many favours at her hands; I had been judged and condemned and forgiven again and again, and now it was my turn, and she had something to thank me for, and it gave me tremendous satisfaction.

I smiled faintly, and answered :

‘Don’t thank me, dearest, I have done nothing. If I had a hundred lives I would give them to save you.’

‘But, Bertie dear,’ she exclaimed, ‘you behaved like a hero. Everyone is talking of it, and I am proud of you. You sustained me with your very last breath, and I feared—oh, so painfully—that your devotion had cost you your life. The drive back to Woodsleigh was like a funeral procession, until that happy moment when your eyes opened and looked at me wonderingly !

‘You came to see me unselfishly, never thinking of yourself,’ Blanche continued solemnly ; ‘you bore up bravely, though I knew you were in pain, and when you fainted my heart bled for you. I knew how ill you were then, and upset as I was, I roused myself to attend to you, and for the last three days I have experienced poignant anxiety. Only

a short time ago I judged you—hastily I have often thought since—and this caused me bitter self-reproach. I have prayed earnestly that you might not die with your sins unforgiven, that time might be given you for repentance, and my prayers have been granted.’ I did not relish the turn the conversation was taking, and I closed my eyes as if it were a dreary sermon. This soon had the desired effect, and as she concluded her peroration, she said gently : ‘ You poor darling ! I am talking too much ; I must not excite you.’

‘ You won’t,’ I thought, ‘ if you continue in that strain,’ but I murmured softly : ‘ No—so happy—you near me—stay with me always.’

‘ You bad, wicked boy,’ Blanche exclaimed playfully, ‘ to say such a thing ! Mrs. Fawcett will think I have been here too long already.’

I was trying to solve a mental problem—

whether this playfulness was assumed to hide her consciousness of my meaning, or whether it was intended to parry the feeler I had thrown out—so I said nothing, which is generally a very safe move. The man who has the gift of saying nothing at the right moment, of ‘masterly inactivity’ in short, is a genius.

Blanche, wishing, I suppose, to change the subject, asked solicitously :

‘Are you comfortable, dear? Have you everything you want?’

‘Yes,’ I answered, adopting a querulous air, and insisting on my point; ‘but I want you. Don’t leave me; you are everything to me; I can’t do without you.’

‘I am not Miss Marchmont,’ Blanche said severely; and then continued softly to herself aside, ‘Poor fellow! he is a little light-headed yet.’

‘No, I am not,’ I answered, betrayed into

vehemence, and then collapsing again: 'you know I want you always. Promise me that some day——'

'We shall see,' replied Blanche soothingly and indefinitely; 'and now I must go, or Dr. Beveridge is sure to say I have caused his patient a relapse, and I have tried his patience as far as I could since you have been ill.'

Blanche retired, and my hopes went down to near zero. If in this time of her pitiful sympathy, and with my so-called heroism fresh in all its factitious glory, she will not bid me hope, things look bad. Perhaps, however, it was the thought of Vera which spoilt the effect, or the reaction from the anxiety Blanche has suffered; for I hear she showed more concern for me at the critical time than ever she had been known to display about anything.

I think I have got this interview down verbatim, with the exception of numerous

prayerful thanks, religious exhortations, and references to the Deity and all His goodness.

Before I close these pages for to-day, a thought strikes me that there must have been something very rotten about our boat, fitly named the *Jezebel*, for the whole side to give way, as it seemed to do. Certainly Sandilands is a heavy man; but I suppose they will fish it up some time, and we shall know. I will start Fawcett out with an idea, and ten to one he will convert it into a patent unsinkable lifeboat, or a summer-house, or a sausage machine. There is no limit to his many-sided ingenuity.

CHAPTER XXX.

A week later.

HANG relapses! hang everything! except good old Dr. Beveridge, who, in spite of his assumed pomposity and his digressions into religion, is a thoroughly good fellow. Here we are again, as the clown says at the tail of the transformation scene, *moi qui vous parle*, at my table generally devoted to writing materials, strong waters and cigars, but now a regular dispensary of half the nauseous drugs in the Pharmacopœia.

This volume will last till the Judgment Day, if I have to neglect it as I have lately. I am as weak as—well, as I pretended to be

when I talked to Blanche last ; and the worst is, the heroic mantle seems to me to be dropping from my shoulders, and I am becoming a chronic nuisance. I have been ill again, uncomfortably ill, and conscious of it ; I have lain helpless in body and almost in mind in a state when the necessity for quiet was too absorbing to consider anything else. Then came the getting better, the worst of all. I have been fed on brandy and beef-tea, soda-water and champagne, until my soul craved for a good honest rumpsteak, something to put my teeth into, instead of always feeling like a sink down which liquids were to be poured.

It is trying to be helpless : if I were in a hospital or a hydro I would not so much mind being a trouble ; but I do like to be independent of assistance, and where I cannot pay people for their services, their attention lays me under an obligation my spirit revolts

against. Still, I am improving, and to be allowed to sit up and write is a priceless privilege after a prolonged sojourn in bed, and being forbidden everything that makes life endurable.

I have been assisting at a sort of Berlin Conference, and on a subject of no little importance either. A solemn deputation consisting of Mrs. Fawcett, her son Harry, and Vernon Travers, the family solicitor, an old and trusted friend and a frequent figure at the Towers, marched in after due notice, and I had used all my available stock of perfumery in a vain attempt to remove the unpleasant odour that always clings to a sick-room. I thought at first they had come to induce me to make my will; but an instant's reflection convinced me that as my testamentary dispositions would be 'nothing to nobody,' I had nothing to fear on that point.

I welcomed them cordially, and first

offering Mrs. Fawcett a cigarette—for she did not disdain the solace of the fragrant weed—I passed the case round to the others and lighted one myself. Dr. Beveridge threatened me with sudden death if I smoked ; but my visitors' grave faces told me some revelation was at hand, so I concluded my nerves would want soothing ; and besides, if I had at all followed out the old Greek sage's advice, ' Know thyself,' myself wanted a smoke very badly indeed, and the least I could do was to attend to its reasonable requirements.

After sundry inquiries as to my health, and hopes for my speedy recovery, Travers, like the long-headed limb of the law that he was, took the lead and opened the ball.

' Mrs. Fawcett thought,' he said, ' my dear fellow, that as you were particularly concerned in the matter of the accident, you might like to be consulted ; and we agreed with her, if

only on the chance that you might be able to throw some light on it. We have decided to say nothing at present to Sandilands and Mainwaring, as they are young and irresponsible; but we can trust to your discretion.'

I bowed, and did my best to look as discreet as possible at a moment's notice. There was a pause, so I filled it, although Travers was ready enough, as a rule; but he was considering.

'Mrs. Fawcett knows she can rely on me for anything,' I said gravely; 'but as I am quite in the dark at present, perhaps you will be so good as to enlighten me.'

'You see, it's just this——' began Fawcett, with all the impetuosity and confidence of youth.

'Hush, Harry!' interrupted his mother hastily. 'Let Vernon tell the story.'

'To cut matters short,' said Travers—everybody called him Travers or Vernon, *tout*

court—‘ my impulsive young friend there—if he will forgive me for so styling him—had the unfortunate *Jezebel* dragged for the other day, and after a good deal of trouble she was brought to the surface. You know the circumstances of the accident well, and I need not recapitulate them ; but I will just draw your attention to the singularity of the fact that Sandilands’ sudden spring from the bow should have broken through such a well-kept craft as she is. Mrs. Fawcett takes care of that,’ he interpolated, ‘ and I would have trusted myself in her at any time.’

‘ That point had struck me,’ I replied.

‘ When the boat was brought to land,’ he continued, ‘ a very superficial examination revealed the startling discovery that, while the weakened planking had undoubtedly given way in addition, the sole cause and origin of the disaster was that an irregularly-shaped piece had been cleanly sawn out, and then

replaced. Even after this lapse of time there were traces of some glue-like substance that had fastened the piece cut out in its place, or, of course, the mischief would have been found out directly the boat was put into the water. Now, this obviously shows that some malicious hand had been at work; and if we needed any confirmation of this, it is amply supplied by an examination of the second boat, the *Firefly*, in which identically the same thing has been done.

‘The criminal,’ Travers went on didactically, ‘whoever he or she is, must have had a good idea as to who would occupy these two boats, or we should have discovered the same thing in the third; but in that case the damage is altogether wanting. The first conclusion, then, that we are led to, is that the person or persons against whom this malevolence was directed were well known to have been going in one of these two boats.

I myself incline to the opinion that the intended victim was one of the most favoured guests, who was most likely to go in the *Jezebel*, and that the *Firefly* was operated upon as well to make sure of securing the desired end. For had he or she been of less consideration, there was the certainty of his presence being relegated to the latter, and possibly to the third and altogether inferior boat, which, however, was untouched. Secondly, Campbell, the water-keeper—who has been bound to secrecy, as I beg you will also consider yourself—says that he examined the boats early in the day previous, and would be prepared to swear that the mischief was not done then ; so that the miscreant had undoubtedly planned his *coup* for that particular excursion, and that only. The great question, then, is, Who did it, or, to begin with, Against whom was the harm intended ? We have not consulted the others, as we

should have to take too many into our confidence, and we are anxious, if possible, to discover the criminal privately, that we may deal with him according to his merits. We do not wish to cause needless pain or scandal.

‘I confess myself unable,’ Travers continued severely, ‘to conceive any motive for such a dastardly act ; and yet we have some wretch deliberately at work planning the destruction of perhaps one or two persons, and so desperate and reckless that to gain his ends he does not hesitate to jeopardize the lives of no less than eighteen people. That such a cowardly plot should be laid at the Towers seems incredible, I know ; we can think of no one at all likely—no one who could have had the slightest interest or inducement to attempt such cold-blooded murder ; and, again, we know of no one amongst the party likely to have such a

deadly enemy, though, of course, we are driven to admit it.'

'And therefore you do me the honour to suppose I have an assassin dogging my footsteps,' I interrupted. 'I really don't think I am the intended victim; but stay——'

The recollection of Matthew Simpson flashed across my mind. Supposing he had learnt the truth about Vera. But, no; he would never be capable of such deliberate villainy as to risk all these lives just to cause my death. Besides, it was not the work of a disposition like his. He might lay in wait and butcher me brutally, but he would never have had invention enough to originate such a diabolical scheme.

'You have a suspicion?' Travers said quickly, looking me through and through.

'I had for a moment,' I replied; 'but an instant's reflection convinced me my suspicions were groundless.'

‘ Still, you could find a motive,’ he persisted, ‘ for the deed ?’

‘ Yes,’ I answered, ‘ under certain circumstances which I have every reason to believe do not exist. However, I can easily ascertain ; and I will say no more about it at present, for fear of causing an otherwise good fellow needless injury, if, as I believe, my suspicions are unjust. Cannot Mrs. Fawcett’s feminine intuition help us ?’

‘ Not at all,’ replied that lady emphatically. ‘ As far as I know, I haven’t a serious enemy in the world ; neither, I should say, has Harry.’

‘ Certainly not !’ assented that young man ; ‘ but I wasn’t in either of the two boats.’

‘ You might have been, though,’ she replied, looking at him fondly and admiringly. ‘ Blanche Haviland is a very unlikely one to have been marked out for death, and so was my escort, Mr. Paget ; while Sandilands and

Mainwaring, and Miss Trenchard and Violet Stuart, are the last people in the world to have a romance or a deadly enemy like the one that engineered this atrocious work. I say nothing of the second boatload, for, like Mr. Travers, I am convinced in my own mind that the would-be murderer's hand was directed against some one of us in the *Jezebel*—the best boat of all—and scuttling the *Firefly* was only a measure of precaution to make absolutely sure of the victim.'

'Yes, that's it, mater,' broke in Harry Fawcett impatiently; 'the grand thing to do, is to put yourself in the man's place. Now, I am the villain, and you, Clifford, the man I want to kill. I know you will be in the *Jezebel*, but, to make quite sure, I cut a hole in the *Firefly* as well. Now, it isn't likely it was the mater, or Paget—just back from foreign service—and I know Jim Sandilands and Mainwaring too well for them to have

any bloodthirsty scoundrels on their track ; while I am sure the Trenchard and Stuart girls are as innocent and meek as sucking-doves ! So there's only you and Miss Haviland left. She is a perfect saint, and no one would harm her ; and you, old man, in spite of her bearing-rein, have been a loose fish ! Haven't you any broken hearts or ruined homes to answer for, with heavy fathers or infuriated husbands in prospect to take revenge ? Confess, if you know of any, for the honour of the house ! Some of the people have left already ; and if it gets wind that there is a secret assassin at work at Woodsleigh, who tries to drown our visitors, we may as well shut up the Towers and go into lodgings at once !'

'That would be dreadful !' said Mrs. Fawcett. 'We must try and hush it up, if we can.'

'It's no laughing matter, Harry,' said

Travers; 'but there's a good deal in what you say. Come now, Clifford, can you think of anyone at all likely to do you an injury?'

I made a rapid mental survey. The Rev. Ambrose would not have landed yet, Simpson would have told me to my face before dealing me the *coup de grâce*, Mrs. Nelson had no particular reason for wishing my death, and Vera would have given her life for mine. Lisette had threatened to kill Blanche; but, then, she would say anything, and she would not have compassed my destruction too, or she would have defeated her own object. Still, she had seemed very peculiar, and looked extraordinarily upset when we had all returned in safety. I would see her and judge for myself; and meanwhile I must dissemble.

'No!' I answered emphatically; 'I know of no one except the person I mentioned just now, and he is so unlikely a murderer that I have no hesitation in saying he is inno-

cent. But I will take immediate steps to put his guilt or innocence beyond question. If I am the individual aimed at, I shall probably be the first to discover my enemy, and we will then decide upon his punishment.'

'You don't know what may happen next,' interposed Mrs. Fawcett in alarm. 'The house might be set on fire, and we might all be burnt in our beds!'

'Now, if you'd only have consented to have those patent sprinklers I wanted——' began Harry.

'And have all the furniture saturated,' Mrs. Fawcett retorted indignantly. 'Why, it might as well be burnt at once; and it is insured against fire, but not against dirty water!'

'Very true, dear Mrs. Fawcett,' replied Travers, smiling in spite of himself; 'but may I remind you we have not settled the

question of the detection of this evil genius of Mr. Clifford's, for we seem to have come to the unanimous decision that he is the Jonah. We can, of course, offer a reward for the discovery of the scoundrel, but circumstances point so strongly to its being no ordinary crime, that I would persuade you to hesitate before publishing to the world what will be a painful scandal as far as yourself and the Towers are concerned; and if, as Clifford avers, he is not the object of attack, we know not who may be involved, or what family history may be dragged into court. Let us await events a few days, at least; we shall lose nothing by that.'

'Except to get up some morning, perhaps,' Mrs. Fawcett exclaimed, 'and find poor Mr. Clifford dead in bed!'

'I am quite willing to risk it,' I said, laughing, 'if you are.'

'By Jove, Clifford, old man!' chimed in

Fawcett, 'you're quite a dangerous party to have in the house. It is really exciting; I think I shall come and patrol your room at night with a revolver and a dark lantern; or would you like me to rig you up an electric burglar alarm that will ring if anyone breathes in the vicinity?'

'No, thank you,' I said fervently; 'and I beg you, dear Mrs. Fawcett, not to be under any apprehension on my account. I have not at all made up my mind that I am the intended victim.'

Then they left me in peace, and I meditated profoundly over another cigarette. Was there anything in Lisette's wild, mad threat? Brooding over the idea of marrying me, she may have grown monomaniacal; but if she had drowned me and Blanche, and the whole party, how would it have served her purpose? Still, I will see her; she is *mouchard* enough to have discovered the

perpetrator of the attempt, or, at least, to throw some light upon it.

The post has just brought me a letter from Vera, sent on from my chambers by my friend Meredith, who says :

‘ I think I know the handwriting of a dun or a *bona roba* too well to trouble you with their billets-doux, but the enclosed looks of consequence.’

‘ St. Veronica’s Home of Mercy.

‘ MY DEAR BERTIE,

‘ It is only two short weeks since I saw the last of you, darling, but, oh ! what an eternity it seems since that morning when you left me, as I thought, coldly ; but you meant it for kindness ! Everything seemed closing in around me that day, as if I were in the iron coffin of Ludovico Sforza. I had said good-bye to you, whom I loved ; I was cut off from everyone I knew ; and the prospect of religious work looked dark and disheartening.

‘ I decided, as you generously wished me to keep some part of my income, to transfer it to the coffers of St. Veronica’s ; and this, I am sure, facilitated my admission. I have been treated with every kindness and thoughtfulness, and my fellow-workers are remarkably cheerful and bright, considering the squalor and wretchedness they come in daily contact with. They were full of consideration, and inured me by degrees to the fearful poverty and distress it is our task to try and relieve. I have laboured my hardest, and my conscience encourages me ; but I had not the faintest conception of the wretched homes there are and the abject misery that exists, which we are quite unable to cope with, even assisted, as we are, by all sorts of donations, which begin with old boots and broken victuals, and command our highest admiration in the shape of jewellery and money. The mission is blessed, and the workers too. I

can ask for mercy, and feel now that I am trying to do God's will, and that there is hope for me ; my mind is much more at rest. But, darling, I cannot put you out of it ; I never cease to think of you, and to love you as fondly as ever, though I pray earnestly against the sin.

‘ Perhaps it is wrong of me to write to you at all, but I wanted so much to know whether you are going to be married. If you are, do send me a description of the ceremony when it is over, and tell me what your wife and the bridesmaids wore. I am only human yet, you see, and I ought not to trouble about such frivolities ; but I take a great interest in everything that belongs to you, dear, and I should love to know. You would laugh at poor little me if you could see me in the garb of our order, which has the most hideous *coiffure* of any I ever saw ; but I do not mind. I am happy, and never think about personal appear-

ance or vanity, when I see the fearful lives so many poor people live.

‘Do tell me if you are happy. Some day, perhaps, your wife, when she knows all my story, may think of me mercifully, for my punishment has been great. I should like you to write to me this once. May Heaven’s blessing rest on you both! is the earnest prayer of

‘VERA (SISTER AGATHA).’

There is a tone throughout the letter as if she was trying to persuade herself she is happy when she is nothing of the kind. However, she has chosen for herself, and I am not to blame. How she takes my marriage for granted, and how very wide of the mark she is! I think sometimes I am further from it than ever I was.

Now I must leave off; I am as weak as a kitten, and my writing is shaky, and strongly suggestive of D.T.

CHAPTER XXXI.

The next evening.

LISETTE is the very devil incarnate ! I never gauged the treacherous depths of that young tiger cat ; I can hardly realize now the fiendish spirit that animated her. Murderers *in esse* are happily not often to be met with until after their crime and arrest, and then we treat them as an interesting type of the genus *homo*, and level lorgnettes at them in the dock as if they were a new and rare specimen of wild beast.

Last night I was reading quietly by myself, when there was a tap at my door. I called out ‘ Come in,’ hoping it was Blanche. In

walked Lisette. Her whole appearance, her expression, was wild and uncanny. There was a steely, desperate, threatening look in her eyes ; she looked as if she meditated some mischief. I thought for a moment she meant to murder me, and my first impulse was to ring the bell.

Her bosom rose and fell in quick, hurried pulsations, and she was under the influence of some overmastering emotion, for she had lost command of her voice, and she spoke in jerky, spasmodic sentences.

Without any apologies for her abrupt entrance, she said in dry, husky, anxious tones :

‘Have you heard—the reason—the accident at Gladeside—has been discovered?’

‘Yes,’ I answered sternly, with an inkling of the truth, and looking her straight in the face until her eyes dropped beneath my penetrating gaze ; ‘and a heavy reward is to be offered for the *woman* who sawed the holes

in the two boats, and then with devilish cunning glued in the pieces again, so that they should not be noticed. Her scheme failed, but none the less a severe punishment awaits her.'

'I am a miserable woman,' Lisette answered, breaking down all at once into hard, tearless sobs. 'Yes, I did it!' she gasped. 'Ring the bell, and send for assistance, but first hear me.'

'Nothing can justify you,' I began, with cold determination. 'To wilfully put the lives of eighteen people in peril is incapable of the slightest palliation.'

But still I did not ring—I was curious to learn her motives; but I took the precaution to lock the door.

'I loved you!' Lisette cried, with mad passion; 'I loved you beyond my life, beyond my soul, beyond my God. I would have killed the whole world ruthlessly if they

had stood between me and my love. I nearly poisoned your hateful Blanche when I threatened to ; but something held me back, and I was confident of parting you. You have deceived her again with your smooth tongue, poor fool that she is, and I suffered the tortures of hell, as I saw myself powerless to put an end to the silly farce she calls love-making. I saw you yielding to her cold embraces, when my glowing ardour could have crushed the life out of you when our lips met, so that we could be united the more closely, and there were no bounds to my jealousy and rage.'

'That is quite sufficient,' I interposed firmly. 'I am going to ring and have you handed over to justice.'

'Wait !' she said imperiously and with fiery energy, transformed as she was into a beautiful jealous fury.

My attention was enchained, and I listened.

‘Listen,’ she continued with burning eloquence, ‘there was but one crime between me and my hopes. If I had poisoned Miss Haviland, detection would have been nearly inevitable. As it was, no one but you could swim, and I counted on the catastrophe taking all thoughts from the cause of it, until the boats would no longer have shown traces of being tampered with. The glue would dissolve and give way after lunch, when the champagne had affected you all, and there would be no hope. You would make an effort to save Miss Haviland, and fail, and save yourself——’

‘Miss Haviland and I would have gone to the bottom together,’ I corrected grimly.

‘I would have told you all, and my great love should have made you forgive the sin I had committed for your sake. Miss Haviland’s death would have put you in possession of her whole fortune, for it has been

willed to you for a long time, and you would have had no obstacle to raise against marrying me. I would have come to your room in the dead of night, and tempted you with all the witchery that women have given them. You should have fallen before the temptation as Samson did before Delilah. I would have been coy, and tantalized you until, with your blood on fire and your brain maddened by my kisses, you would have promised to marry me from sheer passion ; and then—then I had the license ready ! See !’ She pulled it from her bosom with a theatrical gesture. ‘ You should have been mine at last ! We would have flown to some happy Southern clime far from any fear of the consequences, and I would have loved you as no other woman living could. I would have worshipped you as no one was ever worshipped before, and we should have been in paradise ! Happiness is no word for

the heavenly bliss that should have been ours !'

' You wicked creature !' I said prosaically, but with emphasis.

' Now all is lost,' she continued, her tone changing suddenly to deep despair. ' I was so sure of success, I was horror-struck when you all came back in safety. And my punishment came swiftly. When you were ill, when I thought I had killed you, my own precious darling, I knew no rest—I was going mad. I have watched over you night after night, when I had to hide myself and risk exposure and dismissal. Then, when I realized you were coming back to life to marry Miss Haviland, I was tempted to kill you and myself, that we might be united in death and the next world !'

' Mrs. Fawcett was nearer the truth than I imagined,' I murmured to myself.

I ought to specify that I have translated

Lisette's fiery torrent of words into intelligible language ; for her wild, agitated mixture of French and English, of patois and ejaculations, it is impossible to reproduce. I have endeavoured to do so before ; but I could not do justice to her way of expressing herself, and I have generally had to relapse into my native tongue.

‘ I spared you ; I loved you ! ’ Lisette continued tremulously. ‘ There is nothing left now but that I kill myself. Think kindly of me when you remember how much I loved you. Miss Marchmont made a sacrifice—I have committed a crime for you ! ’

Hang the woman ! she was mad undoubtedly ; but her words touched me, and she was sincere. Still, it was no time for yielding to sentiment, and I said gravely :

‘ You will find there is a good deal left. Murder is not attempted with impunity.’

I turned round and rang the bell. Back

again, and Lisette was lifting a bottle to her lips. I seized it, and after a struggle flung it in the fireplace.

She wrestled like a wild cat.

‘Let me go!’ she shrieked; ‘I will kill myself; I will throw myself from the window!’

I was only weak, and Lisette had the strength of despair. In another minute it would have been all over, when I heard the door-handle tried and Harry Fawcett’s welcome voice :

‘Can I come in?’

‘Yes; quick! Help! Burst the door open!’

I had just enough breath left to shout.

My tones must have been urgent, for there were three rapid steps backward, a spring and a mighty crash, and luckily the lock gave way.

He whistled as he took in the situation.

Lisette had ceased to struggle on his entrance, and I sat down exhausted.

‘Whatever is the matter?’ he asked.

I took breath leisurely, only pointing warningly to Lisette, and the fireplace, where the contents of the bottle were spreading a pungent smell of almonds. Keeping an eye on her, he picked it up and sniffed.

‘Yes, as I thought—hydrocyanic, otherwise prussic acid.’

Another tap, a servant in answer to my ring, and, mindful of scandal, I went to the door and told the man to ask Mrs. Fawcett and Mr. Travers to come to me immediately. If Harry had not turned up when he did, Lisette would by now have been lying in a shapeless heap in the quadrangle below.

Fawcett seemed to realize the gravity of the scene and its serious import, for his usual loquacity had deserted him, and he was wonderfully solemn and quiet. A reaction

seemed to have set in with Lisette after her outburst — she sat in moody silence, and showed no signs of repeating her rash attempt.

At last Fawcett broke the oppressive silence, and in what were certainly not cheerful or vindictive tones he asked, looking towards Lisette :

‘What does this mean for her? What will she get?’

Lisette looked up with a momentary flash of interest, and then relapsed into her former sullen apathy.

Somehow my heart failed me; I could not explain in her presence what punishment she might receive, so I only answered evasively :

‘Oh, it all depends upon the circumstances and the counsel retained. I couldn’t say.’

‘But there is some limit,’ he persisted anxiously. ‘What is the maximum sentence?’

‘I don’t know,’ I answered shortly. ‘I haven’t seen a law-book for years!’

Just then, to my relief, the door opened *sans ceremonie*, and Mrs. Fawcett and Vernon Travers came in. They seemed to know instinctively they were in the presence of the culprit, for they said nothing until I had gone to the door, and made sure no one was listening, and then for greater security I drew the *portière* across it.

‘I think I may say we can guess why you sent for us,’ said Travers, glancing at Mrs. Fawcett; ‘but perhaps you had better explain matters.’

I cleared my throat to begin a speech, but thought better of it, although this was my first chance of defending a prisoner.

‘This,’ I said, indicating her, ‘is Lisette, Miss Haviland’s maid. She has confessed——’

‘Without prejudice, without prejudice,’

murmured Travers, his legal instincts getting the better of him.

‘Has confessed to me,’ I continued, ‘that she cut the holes in the boats at Gladeside, and glued in the wood, hoping we should all be drowned after lunch!’

‘The wretch!’ exclaimed Mrs. Fawcett, glaring at Lisette as only one woman can glare at another.

‘But with what motive?’ asked Travers, with a puzzled look.

‘Perhaps I had better not tell you,’ I answered cautiously.

‘You may as well,’ interposed Lisette, looking up defiantly, ‘or I will. I loved Mr. Clifford to distraction. I would not live without him. I knew Miss Haviland had bequeathed to him all her money, and I thought if she was dead, I could persuade him to marry me. Is that sufficient, or shall I tell you the details of the saw, and that I

experimented to see how long the cement would hold ?’

‘By Jove !’ exclaimed Harry Fawcett laconically, struck with awe.

‘What an extraordinary woman !’ Travers remarked with emphasis, putting up his eyeglass.

‘You vile creature,’ ejaculated Mrs. Fawcett ; ‘it is a wonder we were not all drowned !’

Lisette had not mentioned our love passages, for which I was devoutly thankful, and something prompted me to take up the cudgels on her behalf ; but I must be careful, and not show any prejudice in her favour. So I assumed an impartial air, and I was master of the situation to some extent, for I had got over my surprise at the revelation, while they were in the height of theirs.

I gave them a few seconds to recover from their astonishment, and then began :

‘We must come to some decision about this lamentable business. It is for Mrs. Fawcett to say, guided by you, Vernon, what shall be done. On the one hand, a prosecution involves not only trouble, but would, probably, end in a verdict of insanity, while there would be endless disclosures which the papers are only too glad to get hold of and magnify to an unwarrantable extent. On the other, it is impossible to let such a crime go unpunished.’

‘I should think so, indeed!’ interjected Mrs. Fawcett viciously.

‘I am certainly in favour of a middle course,’ said Mr. Travers; ‘if I knew of one that would adequately meet the case, as far as punishment goes, without publicity.’

‘I don’t want to bias you unduly in any way,’ I suggested equably; ‘but I shrink from the idea of a public prosecution. Fancy Lisette’s story in the hands of a cross-

examining counsel, Blanche Haviland, myself, you, and all the boating-party, dragged into court, and every detail of our life here gaped at and gloated over by the scandal-loving public ! Blanche would never survive the ordeal, and you, Harry, would be committed for contempt as sure as you sit in that chair ! Picture yourself in the witness-box,' I continued, addressing myself to Mrs. Fawcett, 'questioned and catechized and bullied on every point that could be twisted, so as to shake your evidence. I am not exaggerating, Travers, am I ?'

'Not at all,' he assented ; 'any alternative almost would be better than that.'

'How dreadful !' exclaimed Mrs. Fawcett ; 'I wouldn't have it happen for the world !'

'Right you are, mater,' joined in Harry, at length recovering the use of his tongue. 'The Towers would be a marked house ever afterwards ; and when you asked fellows

down for a bit of shooting they'd nudge one another at the clubs, and say, "That's the place where they half drown you first, and then haul you into court to swear away a woman's liberty for it." No, bad as Lisette is, I'd rather let her go scot-free first !'

'You take a great interest in her, Harry,' I said suddenly, seeing my way to another argument. 'Come, it's your turn to confess; you may have to in the witness-box. You are very fond of her?'

'Yes, I was,' he admitted with a shame-faced air; 'but she would never have anything to say to me, she was too much gone on you.'

'You've kissed her many a time, I dare say,' I hazarded, slowly feeling my way.

'Well, yes,' he admitted; 'but that's nothing. The pretty servants always expect it; they would think a fellow a muff if he didn't.'

‘ You bad, wicked boy !’ said his mother ; but she was more proud of him than vexed.

‘ Now, dear Mrs. Fawcett,’ I insinuated, ‘ bear that in mind, and think what a story a defending barrister would make of it. And then a verbatim report in the dailies, and the evening papers coming out with startling headlines, such as, “ Revelations of a Country House,” “ The son and heir kisses the servants,” and “ Attempted murder by a servant who is jealous of a visitor !” ’

‘ Awful, awful !’ ejaculated Mrs. Fawcett, looking the picture of horror ; ‘ I will never permit a prosecution !’

‘ I should think not, mother,’ said Harry anxiously ; ‘ we should be the laughing stock of everybody. I should never dare to show my face in town again !’

‘ Your arguments are very good and convincing,’ put in Travers quietly to me ; ‘ but I must ask to what they lead. What is to

be done with our prisoner—have you any suggestions to make? We are at a deadlock. We will not prosecute—we cannot let her go unpunished. What other course is there?’

I was at a loss, certainly, when Lisette, who had been listening as indifferently as if the discussion concerned her not at all, spoke in a dreary, utterly *blasé* fashion :

‘There is a convent of the Sacred Heart near the village where I was born. The mother educated me, and was good to me as a child. She would receive me, and anyone taking the vows is never allowed to renounce them. I should be a prisoner for life.’

‘To give you my candid opinion, that strikes me as a very satisfactory way out of the difficulty,’ said Travers, breaking the pause that had followed on Lisette’s unexpected speech; ‘I think our friend Clifford has put the case in a nutshell—in a way,’ he

added dryly, 'that does credit to his professional training. Speaking as a solicitor, I have no hesitation in denouncing this course as a very gross miscarriage of justice, even allowing for the fact that anyone who could deliberately plan such a heartless massacre can hardly be *compos mentis*, and responsible for their actions. But to drop the scales and bandage of the blind goddess, whose ruling we too often vainly attempt to attain by means of mere law, and who, I fear, would lead us sadly astray in this instance, my advice, as a man of the world and as your friend, is most decidedly in favour of this alternative.

'There is this to be thought of,' he proceeded, 'that should the circumstances ever transpire, the law would call our connivance at Lisette's escape by a very ugly name, and the consequences would be serious; so that it is a matter for grave consideration

whether we can place sufficient reliance in the fidelity of those in possession of the secret. Our own share in it we shall conceal for the best of reasons ; but what of the man, or men, who discovered the state of the boats ?'

'Old Campbell, the water-keeper,' interposed Harry Fawcett eagerly, 'is the only one who knows of the holes being made, and I bound him to the strictest secrecy. He is a Scotchman, naturally reticent—you might say gruff in the extreme—and the last man in the world to talk carelessly. Besides, he has been years in our family, and is devoted to us.'

'Oh yes,' assented Mrs. Fawcett ; 'my husband took him as a boy, and he has a sort of feudal liking and veneration for us. I will see him, of course, and I will be answerable for his discretion. Without exaggeration, I would trust him with my life !'

'Very well,' replied Travers, 'nothing

could be better ;' and then he continued, sternly and emphatically, turning to her : ' And you, Lisette, will keep silence, unless you wish to exchange the *Sacré Cœur* for *les travaux forcés*. You know what that means ?'

' Oh yes,' replied Lisette, with a shudder, as if she had already had some experience of New Caledonia, which, after these revelations, would not have surprised me.

' That point disposed of,' Travers continued, ' there are others to be studied ; but I think we can justify our action. We owe a plain duty to society beyond what our own feelings may prompt, and that is, not to allow a criminal to escape to work further mischief. By the means proposed we effect this, for once within the convent walls, Lisette will be safe from committing any further crimes ; and if she is not adequately punished for her sin, it is because such punishment as the

case deserves would recoil in a great measure upon our own heads. We can do no more.'

'The prisoner,' he continued in the tones of a judge assuming the black cap, 'will have every opportunity of expiating her offence, and to this I would most earnestly counsel her ; but as she is bound for an establishment where this will be insisted on night and day, I need say no more, but leave her to her own conscience, whose remorse will not be a light sentence to bear.'

Travers spoke so solemnly that I fancied myself in court, and listened instinctively for the final and impressive 'And may the Lord have mercy on your soul !'

There was a pregnant pause, and then he added :

'But I am only giving my opinion, and the decision does not rest with me. What say you, Mrs. Fawcett ?'

'I agree with you cordially,' she answered

in a tone of relief ; ‘ it seems hard that such a wicked creature should go unpunished ; but if in executing justice upon her we are to punish ourselves beyond description, we had better allow her to escape her just deserts !’

‘ Hear, hear, mater ! them’s my sentiments to a T,’ added Harry. ‘ What do you think, old man ?’ turning to me.

‘ I think you could not possibly do better,’ I replied, gratified at the turn things had taken ; ‘ the plan seems to me a capital one, and, after all, why should we be vindictive ? If we had been drowned, it would have been a very different question for our survivors.’

‘ One point must be carefully attended to,’ said Travers : ‘ one of us must see her safely given into the custody of the Mother Superior. Clifford, you are too ill ; Mrs. Fawcett, it is out of the question for you ; Harry, you will never do : you would be yielding to the siren’s charms, and letting her escape. There is no

one but myself, and, fortunately, it happens that I had to go to Paris next week on business. I will expedite matters and go to-morrow. Really,' he added *sotto voce* to me, 'if she were to throw herself under a train *en route*, it would be a great relief !'

'So good of you, Vernon !' from Mrs. Fawcett, and 'You're a regular brick !' was Harry's comment.

'We are leaving Miss Haviland out of our calculations,' continued Travers ; 'but I have no doubt she can be made to see things as we wish. We had better tell her all—half-confidences are dangerous—and explain how it is we are compelled to deprive her of her maid's services. I will speak to her myself ; and now, dear Mrs. Fawcett, if you will kindly come with me and arrange for the safe keeping of Lisette, I think we shall have done all we can for to-night.'

'I shall not kill myself,' interposed Lisette ;

‘ I would rather live in the *Sacré Cœur*, and think of Mr. Clifford. May I kiss your hand before I go ?’ she asked me pleadingly.

I could hardly refuse so simple a request, although the act made me feel distressingly foolish before the others.

‘ Let me caution you,’ said Vernon Travers sternly to Lisette, ‘ to behave discreetly, and not like a prisoner, and obey our orders without question !’

They departed, leaving Harry behind for a moment. He had recovered his spirits and remarked feelingly :

‘ Doosid fine girl, old chappie, and, by Jove ! she is gone on you.’

And so this Council of Four came to an end. Let us hope we have acted wisely, for, as Travers said, the consequences of disclosure would be very serious. Thank goodness ! no one has remembered to inquire into my share in the blame, and when they do, the confession

of a few stray kisses will not compromise me.

Events came so quickly upon one another, and the narration of them has taken up all my attention, so that I have not had time to weigh the questions involved, and attach the proper importance to the information I have been put in possession of. I feel completely played out. It is a humiliating confession for me to make ; but I suppose the best of constitutions will begin to resent persevering attacks upon it in time, and my wild oats have taken a good deal of sowing. However, I shall not be able to sleep on top of all this excitement, so I will struggle on with you, my journal, my companion.

Blanche has made her will in my favour, according to Lisette, and she had no reason to lie about it, as her schemes all hinged upon that fact. It is very long odds against my surviving Blanche ; but it is a gratifying

proof of her regard, to say the least. Poor Blanche ! how good you are to me, and how badly I have returned your kindness ! Is it mere gratitude prompted by my conscience, or is it love that pervades my mind, and makes me feel anxious to be worthy of it ? I feel for the moment that if only she would marry me, I would be a devoted husband, and lead an irreproachable life to repay her a little.

But a truce to such vapid moralizing ; it is only the old story, ‘ When the devil was ill, the devil a saint would be,’ and in two months’ time, with renewed health and strength, I should pine for unhallowed freedom and bachelor Bohemianism.

Yet I am aiming at the treadmill, I am anxious to kiss the rod, and tie myself down to Blanche and formality, Blanche and prim propriety. If it were only Vera now ! but really if Blanche will have me, I will do my

duty to her. I fear I may promise anything in safety, the chance of my ever being called upon to fulfil it is so very remote. I am very fond of her, largely tinged by gratitude as my affection is ; the *affaire* Lisette is the very last esclandre, and Blanche is only a woman. Surely it cannot be impossible to win her, but the prospect looks undeniably hopeless.

CHAPTER XXXII.

The next evening.

BLANCHE is obdurate. She is sorry, she is pained to refuse me ; but there is latent in her mind a stern sense of duty and a bulwark of determination that are not to be swept away easily. Moreover, which is worse, my blandishments have not the charm of novelty, their pristine freshness is considerably the worse for wear ; and if she reflects, as I should in her place, that they have been exercised upon Vera, and Mrs. Nelson, *and* Lisette, they are still less likely to be effective. Of course all is not lost ; while a woman's heart is free, and not given to someone else,

there is always a way to it ; but the unfortunate occurrences of late have taken a very considerable discount off the moving effects of lover-like attentions and beseeching looks, more eloquent than the ' winged words ' of the ancients.

Violent protestations of love I never affected. True love — and when you are acting a part you should strive after the real thing as much as possible—is almost dumb, except amongst poets and similar hysterical maniacs. Anyone who can make a long, flowing, well-rounded speech expressive of his admiration is either very little in love, or has his emotions so wonderfully under control as to be practically the same, or else is a rhapsodical individual, whose pleasure in hearing the great Ego, himself, talk far transcends his interest in the result of his eloquence.

True love, what I have seen of it—and I speak more especially of the overmastering

emotion *au moment* which compels the revelation of the feelings—is either sheepishly shamefaced or modest and diffident in medium temperaments ; but even in the strong-willed type, whose intense virility overpowers and literally magnetizes the listener, you will not find coherency and beautifully-turned consecutive sentences, flowing in melodious periods, as novelists would have us believe.

In making love, everyone will admit it is necessary to feel the way cautiously, always prepared for a retreat, to cover which gracefully is the great desideratum, except in the case of your despairing lover who groans out his protestations with the more fervour that he knows they will avail him nothing.

When the affections are not deeply concerned, there is really such a delicious freedom nowadays that the above reads like bathos ; and you may propose to your *chère amie*, be rejected, and ask for and get a kiss as conso-

lation without at all alarming the erstwhile 'timid, shrinking, blushing maiden.' Still, I will stick to my text, that true love has not a brazen face and a clarion tongue to spout yards of eloquence and poetry in the form of a proposal.

Luckily, I can be perfectly frank and truthful with Blanche now, for I have grace enough to own to feeling troubled when I had to say things that were anything but the truth under the clear, steady gaze of those eyes, so unfaltering from the high-minded uprightness of their possessor.

I was unwise in many ways to put my fate again to the test so soon; but I am growing robust again, and I wanted to trade on my pale, interesting looks, and my illness, which had arisen from doing Blanche service like any true knight; but unfortunately she was inclined to regard me, next to Lisette, as the *Deux ex machinâ* of the accident, which

naturally militated against my success very considerably. But I will quote as much of the interview as I can remember.

I sent Blanche an affectionate little note this afternoon, saying how much I should like to see her, and adding that I would not have ventured to trouble her to come and see me, but that I did not feel so well, and I was not equal to any exertion.

She came in due course; but I could see that a great deal of the romantic glamour that had surrounded me as her preserver had vanished under the revelation of the cause of the accident.

‘ Good-afternoon, Bertie,’ was her cool greeting. ‘ I hope you feel better. I should have been to see you before, only I thought it probable you might be knocked up—as your note implied—after the events of last night, which came as a great surprise and shock to me, I can assure you !’

‘Lisette has gone, I suppose?’ I inquired eagerly, for I had had no tidings of her since the morning, when I had learnt she was still under lock and key.

‘Yes, she and Mr. Travers started off about two o’clock,’ answered Blanche, ‘and I am very glad of it. I lay awake all last night, thinking she would be quite capable of setting the Towers on fire; and—would you believe it?—the hardened wretch, as she was driven away, was actually throwing kisses to one of the men-servants, and she looked as gay and smiling as if she had never heard of a conscience. I don’t think we did right to let her off so easily; but they all urged me so strongly that I gave way, in spite of my conviction that ten years’ penal servitude would be the very least punishment that would do justice to the case!’

‘Oh, what matter!’ I answered lightly;

‘it is not as if some of us had actually been drowned : nothing serious has resulted, so we can afford to let her off easily.’

‘Nothing serious has resulted!’ repeated Blanche gravely. ‘Why, Bertie, I am surprised at you! Eighteen lives risked, and you at death’s very door such a little while since! I hardly like to remind you when you are ill, but you ought to remember that it all would never have happened but for you, and it is a pregnant lesson for you against trifling with anyone’s affections. I think how serious the consequences of the affair might have been—eighteen souls hurried into eternity with never a moment to prepare themselves. I tremble when I think how near death I was, and how unfit to die! You must have hours of inactivity, when your mind is free to reflect on the mercy that has been shown us. Take the lesson to heart, think over it, and Lisette’s wicked

deed may yet bring a blessing in its train.'

'Thanks, awfully, Blanche dear,' I replied flippantly; 'but if I did as you suggest I should probably grow melancholy and commit suicide. No, when I am tired of Zola and Daudet, I generally get Harry or Stanton, or some good fellow, to come and sit with me.'

I had spoken recklessly, without thinking, and Blanche looked very grieved, so I changed my tactics.

'Forgive me, Blanche,' I said; 'if only you were with me it would be so different. I could be better then; I would think, and try to do right, if I only had the influence of your dear presence to sustain me.'

'If that is your only inducement to do your duty,' she answered coldly, 'I might as well spare my words. I am no father confessor to give you absolution, but only an

erring mortal like yourself; and if you have no stronger motive for reformation than gaining my favour, your repentance is a hollow mockery. Think of your own soul and the peril it is in, and leave me out of the question.'

'Blanche dearest!' I answered, in intense yearning tones, just dashed by a faint and artistic tremble, 'when we were near death, when I was supporting you in the water, I had no thought. no prayer for myself; all my mind, my energy, was concentrated upon saving you. When in that supreme moment I thought of nothing else, will you deny me the right to think of you above and beyond everything?'

'Think of yourself,' Blanche rejoined, with dismal emphasis; 'think of your sins—your crimes I might almost call them—and the awful consequences of them. I am not here to judge you, but to pray that you may

repent while there is yet time, and lead a new and better life.'

I would have given a good deal to have been able to faint opportunely, and so cut short Blanche's sermon, and at the same time arouse her sympathies; but to pretend to would have been a risky experiment, and I dared not attempt it.

I contented myself with replying feebly, as if I were utterly exhausted:

'I would—with you!'

'Bertie,' she continued, in calm, dispassionate tones, 'you must put that chimera out of your head. I made up my mind on that point some time since, and further consideration only strengthens my resolution. How can you dream that I *dare* entrust my happiness to the keeping of one who has caused me so much pain and anxiety in the past, and who has brought me nothing but grief and humiliation at every turn! And

you seem devoid of any religious principle—I must speak frankly—and regardless of the necessity of leading a higher life in this world, to prepare yourself for the great Hereafter. I am grieved beyond measure at your utter indifference to anything religious.’

I let her continue uninterrupted, while I gained a little—a very little—comfort from the unnecessary emphasis she had put upon daring to entrust her happiness to me; for the expression seemed to say that she had meditated the possibility of doing so, even though she decided against it.

‘I want you to let me speak to you of better things,’ Blanche went on, ‘if only for the sake of our old regard for one another. I feel so strongly that it is my duty, and you will perhaps listen to me sooner than anyone else on the subject. I have no wish to preach, but we ought to be sincerely thankful for the mercy that has been shown us; and

it is surely incumbent on us to show our gratitude by trying to amend our lives, and to take advantage of the opportunity that has been granted us to fit ourselves for the end that must come to everyone sooner or later. Pray with me, before it is too late, that we may repent, and our sins may be forgiven us !'

The household at the Towers, I reflected, was an essentially gay one, and if Blanche took to proselytizing all round like this, they must think her an unmitigated nuisance. It was getting too bad—I must faint or do something to stop this flow of eloquence, so very foreign to the topic I was anxious to discuss.

So my head drooped, and I gasped in feeble, broken tones :

‘ Please—give—wine ; feel so weak !’

Blanche, with quick womanly sympathy—how I have misjudged her !—and with all care

for my spiritual welfare merged in anxiety for the moment, sprang up, poured out the wine with steady hand, and then, supporting my head with her arm, held the glass to my lips.

I sipped it very slowly and languidly, prolonging the process as much as possible. I *do* like being petted.

‘There,’ Blanche remarked, as she put down the empty glass; ‘do you feel better now, poor boy?’

‘Yes,’ I answered very faintly; ‘but don’t leave me, *dearest*. Am I going to die, that you talk to me so seriously? If I am, please kiss me once, and say you forgive me.’

As I write these lines, I feel as if I could curl up like a snail into his shell, and my cheeks grow warm as I think of my confounded hypocrisy; but *n’importe*.

Blanche laid her lips upon mine very gently, without any of the emotion or love-prompted

warmth that I should have liked, and then said briskly :

‘ Going to die !—of course not. Why, the doctor says you are doing well, and will soon be all right again.’

‘ I shouldn’t mind if I were to die,’ I put in feelingly, ‘ since it would have been for you.’

‘ What nonsense !’ she answered cheerfully and carelessly ; but I thought she was just a little touched by my apparent devotion.

‘ I have nothing to live for,’ I said, pleading *in formâ pauperis*, ‘ if you are unkind and cold to me.’

‘ You can hardly accuse me of unkindness,’ Blanche replied unsympathetically ; ‘ and if I am cold, on whose shoulders lies the blame of the necessity ?’

‘ *Mea culpa*, I know,’ I said despondingly ; ‘ but am I never to be forgiven ?’

‘ You are forgiven already, I assure you,’ she said with decision ; ‘ but anything else—

any return to our former relations—is out of the question. Pray believe me, for my mind is made up, and I want to leave you under no uncertainty whatever.'

'Oh, Blanche !' was all I said, but I threw a world of pathos, pleading and despair into those two words—quite as much as I dared ; for any great show of passionate fervour would not have squared with my previously assumed faintness.

She passed over my pathetic words and love-lorn looks in a most heartless fashion ; and, after remarking in the business-like tones of a professional nurse that she was sure I had exerted myself too much in talking to her, and once more impressing on me the urgent necessity of looking forward to a future state, she left me to my own reflections, which were none of the brightest. But faint heart never won fair lady, and I have had more unpromising *affaires* than this that have

eventually turned up trumps ; but then, on the other hand, I had not so much at stake. Any way, I have one good card left in my hand, and that is—*mirabile dictu !*—I am now free from all imbroglios ; and if I can only assume the virtue of reformation, though I have it not, I may not be beyond all hope.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

Two days later.

I HAVE had another interview with Blanche ; I have used every artifice and have tried every endearment, and certainly with good effect. I would not force myself on her like this, but I know she loves me *au fond*, and when the present state of things is the result of my own misdoing, surely I am justified in trying to win her and put matters straight.

I am not one of those impossible characters so common in some pages, whose whole life is modified and spoilt by some little misunderstanding, which in fact supplies the *motif* for the whole story, until of course enlightenment

and reconciliation appear with the last few chapters. No trifles like that shall separate me from the object of my ambition.

I waited until Blanche came to see me, thinking that might be the most propitious time. When she arrived I dropped the *rôle* of interesting invalid, and professed myself much better in answer to her inquiries.

Begging her to be seated, I requested permission to sit beside her on the couch, which she granted in a matter-of-fact fashion that decidedly sat on my *empressement*, as I tried to make it appear what a priceless boon I was asking. Mem. : Only throw flattery enough, and, like mud, some of it is sure to stick.

Blanche looked on good terms with herself, and not disposed to resume her sermon. Yet she was silent, and I hoped embarrassed.

I began :

‘It is kind of you, dear, to come and see me. I don’t know how to thank you.’

She answered lightly :

‘ You need not make such an inestimable privilege of it, considering that, but for you, I should probably not have been alive to come.’

‘ Better and better,’ I thought ; ‘ she is grateful and in a melting mood.’ But I only said : ‘ Oh, it was nothing ; anyone else would have done just the same in my place.’

There was a pause, which I filled up by taking one half-unwilling hand and caressing it tenderly in my own. It made one or two fluttering attempts to release itself, and then settled down as if the captivity was not unpleasant.

‘ Blanche,’ I said, fixing my eyes upon hers with all the intensity of fascination and will that I could throw into them, ‘ you know I love you !’

Her eyes dropped under my ardent gaze, and she answered nothing. I did love her—

I am sure of that ; her coldness and *difficile* demeanour stirred up a fire of passion within me, and then she was very beautiful in the statuesque pose that was so natural to her, and I determined to infuse some warmth into the cold, proud, handsome figure.

‘Blanche,’ I said, in fierce, impassioned tones, ‘I am never to know the happiness of calling you my own—you told me so distinctly. I shall soon be well, and I will go away and try—you know how vainly—to forget you. But just for this one hour let me be happy ! I have you all to myself, and there is no shadow of any kind to come between us. I love you, and, when I think how soon I am to lose you, I must make the most of the little happiness that remains to me !’

‘Why must you go away ?’ asked Blanche, in tones that had a decidedly yielding accent.

‘Unfortunately, Mrs. Grundy has not yet

died out,' I answered, 'and, although it's little I care for her judgment, it might affect you seriously.'

'I care for no one's opinion,' replied Blanche, with an imperious toss of her queenly head. 'My conscience tells me what is right and what is wrong, and I fear no one's strictures beyond that.'

'No, Blanche,' I said ; 'it is as impossible—and reflection will convince you—for me to stay with you any longer not married, and not engaged to you, as you say it is for you to marry me. The sooner we get the parting over, the less painful it will be. But don't let us think of that now, dear, dear Blanche,' I went on pleading earnestly, kneeling at her feet, and holding both her hands in mine and showering kisses upon them. 'Let us be happy for a little time together. I must go ; it is better so. Kiss me once again, dearest ; you will never know how much I have loved

you. Appearances are against me, but my love for you never wavered in reality ; I was never faithless to you in my thoughts !'

I came to an end here ; I was getting deeper than I intended. I was acting sincerity so well that I believed what I said ; but to have reconciled these statements with the actual circumstances would have needed a more machiavelian mind than I can lay claim to. Blanche had a reproachful look in her brilliant eyes, and a generally chastened demeanour that seemed hopeful. She said nothing, and appeared to be thinking deeply. This would not do. I must carry the redoubt by a *coup de main*, not by siege, which would be disastrous to me, and give the enemy time to strengthen the outworks.

'Blanche, my darling,' I said, trying to concentrate all my love and influence into the words, 'may I sit beside you, and hold you in my arms once for the last time ?'

Poor Blanche's heart was too full for words, but she signified her assent. I got up from my knees, sat down beside her, and drew her near to me. The proud head sank on my shoulder as my arms encircled her, and I pressed burning kisses on her cheeks and lips. She was crying softly, and would not meet my eyes, and I soothed her with all the art I was master of, caressing her with gentlest tenderness, and murmuring my love for her ever and anon into the delicate ear that was nearest to my lips.

Her tears subsided, and with half-averted eyes she gave me a look that made me inwardly vow that if I ever did become her husband, she should never have cause to repent it.

I kissed her passionately, holding her close to my heart, and my kisses were not unreturned.

‘Blanche, my dearest,’ I said with fervent

emphasis, 'you love me! Tell me you do!'

With silence more eloquent than words she did not deny the soft impeachment; and once more pressing her to me in the closest of embraces, I continued:

'Yet we must part; but I am happy—oh, so happy, darling, to think I still have your love!'

Blanche's reply, if she made one, was inaudible; but under the impassioned ardour and impetuosity of my kisses, *willades*, caresses, and words, her coldness had vanished, and had I but had at hand one of those expensive dispensations given under the cabalistic seal of "Edw. Cantuar," a special license, I am confident I could have made my victory secure.

But I did not ask Blanche to marry me even in these tender moments. Oh no! Such a course would have obviously detracted

from the sincerity of my protestations ; and I shall go on playing the resigned, heart-broken lover until Blanche, from sheer goodness of heart, will take pity upon me.

I represented that our parting was inevitable, and if Blanche can see any other alternative but marriage, she is cleverer than I think her. She does not wish to marry me, but I am sure she does not want to let me go.

Blanche grew calmer, and though I should have liked to keep up the excitement of love-making, especially to such a willing recipient, I thought it wise to let things cool down, and see what her feelings were when uninfluenced by the exaltation of passion ; for it is a level head that can retain its normal clear judgment when under that sway. Love itself may be calm, unbiased, and discriminating ; but the rapture of passion dominates every sense, enthrals the mind, and overwhelms

principle. It is a temporary madness, but how flat existence would be without it ! Prim spinsters, who have never felt the touch of a lover's kiss, may hold up their hands in horror at the thought, but one is irresistibly reminded of the fox and the unattainable grapes.

Blanche lay still very contentedly in my arms, while I looked down unutterable love into her eyes ; for passion had had its influence upon me, and her acknowledged love had reinforced my own, while the consciousness of the difficulty and uncertainty had intensified the pleasure of the victory.

I kissed her again fondly, to which she made no seeming objection ; but she began in a dreary tone :

‘ You mean to be kind, Bertie, but you are cruel to me. I had better have forgotten you altogether, and you have made me love you again, against my will, as much as ever !’

‘Well, I shall be going away soon,’ I answered, depressed by her mournful accents. ‘Perhaps it was selfish of me, but I wouldn’t have forfeited this afternoon’s happiness for anything.’

‘It was too bad of you,’ she said, and then added softly, ‘but I have been happy too.’

‘Have you, dearest?’ I replied; ‘then what does it matter—why should we have denied ourselves this little bit of sunshine, when it is so soon all to be gloom?’

‘Must you really go?’ Blanche asked in faltering tones unlike her own.

‘I see no other alternative,’ I answered as despondingly as if my heart was wrung with despair.

There was a pause; but, reading Blanche’s heart, I helped her out, and said more hopefully:

‘But perhaps I might come back some day; and, if I had done nothing to forfeit your

esteem, there might be a little hope for me.'

She was holding my hand, and I felt an encouraging responsive pressure.

'I will try,' I said earnestly, 'to deserve your regard. I have nothing on my conscience, and I can begin afresh.'

'Yes,' Blanche replied half archly, cheered at the brightening prospect; 'but do you really think you can keep out of temptation? for when we were—engaged you used to tell me of all sorts of wicked things you did directly you left me, and got back to town and your old friends.'

This was true enough, for I had an insane habit at one time of telling Blanche nearly everything, partly so that she should not think me better than I was, and partly to have the amusement of seeing her shocked.

'Darling,' I urged fervently, 'now it is different: now I have lost the dearest treasure

of my heart, I prize it beyond everything ; and I would give the world to regain it. You know I love you,' I continued with tender emphasis ; ' you know I will try to win my way back to my former happy enviable position. Kiss me again, dearest, and promise me that no one else shall take my place.'

' You need not fear that,' Blanche answered with a smile that was half sweet, half sad ; ' have you found me so fickle in the past ? I forbore to bind you, need you be less generous ?'

' No, my love,' I replied warmly ; ' forgive me, I never doubted you. It was only that I realized how little right I have to your constancy that prompted such an idle question.'

To cut matters short, after sundry other endearments we came to an understanding : that I was on probation for an indefinite

period, and that if nothing unforeseen occurred, and I made no *faux pas*, I might again consider myself the favoured lover.

‘There is a tide in the affairs of men, which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune,’ and there must be a time when the female vascular organ is peculiarly susceptible to the influence of the twin deities of love, and may I not fairly consider I have hit upon it? No word of religion or the need of spiritual reformation escaped my Blanche’s lips, so love, and the prospect of parting with me for ever, must have been paramount in her mind.

Now, I am nothing if not chronological, and next comes the fact that I have just received a woeful letter from Vera, in which she says she fears she is *enceinte*. It is evidently prompted by great agony of mind and overwhelming anxiety, but I may as well quote it here.

‘St. Veronica’s Home of Mercy.

‘ MY DEAREST BERTIE,

‘ I don’t know how to write the dreadful news, but I sadly fear I am to become a mother. I have been waiting anxiously, and hoping against hope ; but I shall have to reconcile myself to the calamity. God alone knows how I dread it, and I have prayed earnestly, as if I were pouring out my heart’s blood, for nights past, that this bitter cup might be taken from me. My punishment is too hard to bear, though I ought to have expected it. But I made what atonement I could ; and I had got to know some little peace of mind before this terrible shock came upon me. I am utterly prostrated by it, and my mind seems as if it would give way. Loath as I am to ask you, I have no option but to implore your advice and assistance. There is nothing imminent to fear, of course ; but, oh ! to look forward to the future

—that way madness lies! I beseech you by everything you hold dear to help

‘Your wretched

‘VERA.’

Poor little Vera! I pity her, and it is very unfortunate, when I had made some good resolutions, and really meant to keep them, that this should rise up against me. The tie between myself and Blanche is far too frail and delicate to stand a disclosure like this, and telling her the truth is out of the question. Women are intolerant enough to anyone who they think has fallen, but when it is proved, and the poor victim has the additional pangs of the world becoming cognizant of the fruit of her shame, then indeed is the time for the female Pharisee to draw her skirts out of reach of contamination, and pass by on the other side.

Happily there is now no prying Lisette to exercise her powers of espionage, and if

the worst has to be faced, I may be able to keep it to myself. Blanche preaches at me, and imagines herself to be a Christian lady; she has many noble and estimable qualities, but only let me ask her assistance on behalf of poor Vera, and where would her Christian principles and general high-mindedness be when opposed by jealousy and cruel womanly instincts?

It is so easy to be good when one is not tried—it is possible to be charitable and give help to the fallen, even; but let your rival—the woman who has drawn away your lover, and lost her all in doing so—come to you and crave succour, and then let us see how your kindness and charity will stand the test, be the Magdalen in never so sore a strait.

The Temple, four days afterwards.

I have not been able to see poor Vera yet; she is ill, and cannot get out. I fear she

must be almost beside herself—the more so, that she has to sternly repress her feelings in her world, and she has not had an opportunity of giving vent to them freely with me. I have written and comforted and consoled her to the best of my ability, but she has got very scrupulous, and all my references to classical characters who have strayed from the path of virtue, such as Heloise and the Fornarina, don't seem to influence her, and I had to assure her that the world would not come to an end because of this awful catastrophe, as she deems it.

I have promised her everything she wishes—short of the one thing, marriage—and if she takes this trouble so much to heart, what must be the agony of mind experienced by the miserable creatures who are deserted in the time of their trial by those who ought to be the first to stand by them?

There is one green spot, one oasis in this

Sahara of sadness. This morning came a letter from Blanche as follows :

‘ The Towers, Thursday afternoon.

‘ DEAREST BERTIE,

‘ Perhaps I ought not to address you so affectionately ; but I mean it, so why should I not say so ? Promise me not to be offended, but I want you to accept the enclosed as a loan, for I fear you must be short of money. I have a *right* to ask you to take it now—haven’t I, dear ?—so I shall stand upon my privilege.

‘ We are going over to Sir Peter’s place to-morrow, and we shall stay the night, so write to me there,

‘ And believe me,

‘ Your loving

‘ BLANCHE.’

The enclosure was a cheque for five hundred pounds !

Magnanimous is a faint expression that utterly fails to express my opinion of her kindness, but it is out of the question for me to accept it; so I have written assuring her of my gratitude in the warmest terms, but saying that I cannot receive such a favour at her hands, and that I shall never cash the cheque, which, however, I shall retain and prize as a memento of her surpassing goodness.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

Woodsleigh Towers, a week later.

How little I thought, when only one short week since I closed this volume in London, how much was to happen before I turned to its pages again! My mind is so full of the sad events of that brief period that I can hardly write coherently, and unless I begin callously at the beginning, my account will be rambling and disconnected.

About half an hour after I finished the last sentence, carefully blotted it, and then locked up the book at my chambers, and happily just before I went out, came a telegram. I took it carelessly enough—in these days

telegrams are so common as to attract no more attention than a letter—and opened it with even greater *insouciance* ; but in an instant, when I had mastered the dread significance of its meagre words, I was transformed into another being.

‘ Take special train to Mallowfield at once. There has been an accident ; I have only a few hours to live. Come, as you love me.—BLANCHE HAVILAND.’

The necessity for immediate action saved me from utter abandonment. The woman who loved me, whom I had betrayed, and who had shown such forbearance and forgiveness, whom I had only just written to acknowledging kindness beyond measure, lay dying. It was no time for sorrow, for self-abasement ; I must fly to her. She wanted my presence—she should have it,

and anything in my power to soothe her last moments.

There was no one else, and my friend Meredith was in, so I ran down and called to him sharply and unceremoniously :

‘Meredith—Cecil, come up this moment!’

He came directly. I was calmer, and I simply said :

‘Go out and find me a hansom, a good one—you know what I mean. Then read that;’ and I thrust the telegram into his hand.

He is a good fellow, and saw I had some strong reason for my behaviour, and went as he was bidden.

Before he was back, I had crammed some things into a portmanteau, and was half-way down the staircase when I met him.

‘Awfully sorry, old fellow!’ was his comment.

‘Yes, yes,’ I answered impatiently, ‘send

a wire and say I am starting at once ; it will comfort her.'

'Can I do anything else ?' he asked.

'No ! No, thank you,' I answered.

I pride myself on my politeness at trying moments, and I clambered into the cab with a hurried injunction and a promise of a princely *douceur* to the driver, if he got me to Coutts' and then to the northern terminus in the quickest imaginable time.

Cabby must have passed the examination at Scotland Yard with flying colours. My preoccupation probably shortened the time ; for, for all my wild anxiety to get on, it only seemed as if two minutes had elapsed since we left the bank, where I cashed Blanche's opportune cheque, when we drove up to the departure entrance.

Most people, I believe, *fling* the cabman a sovereign. I put one into his hand, stepped down, and told the expectant porter who had

got my portmanteau that I wanted a special train, and he was to take me to the proper official at once.

‘This way, sir, this way,’ was his reply.

He was quick to grasp the situation and its possibilities for his own benefit, and I was shown into an office where a clerk, undecided between obsequiousness and insolence, informed me the superintendent, Mr. Hardcastle, was engaged.

‘I must see him ; I want a special train ; it is a matter of life and death !’ was my hackneyed rejoinder. ‘Send in an urgent message, or let me go to him.’

This had the desired effect, and I was shown into an inner room, one side of which was covered with a network of speaking-tubes, and another with a row of telephones and other apparatus. Seated at a desk covered with books and papers was a handsome gray-headed man, whose chief characteristic was

a look of extreme penetration. Cool of temperament and clear-headed, he appeared cut out for his vast responsibilities.

I rapidly and briefly explained my errand. Mr. Hardcastle exclaimed, 'Ah, the accident!' and I was cramming the notes I had provided myself with on his desk, when he stopped me and walked to a telephone. There was soon an answering ring, and he spoke into the instrument in short, decisive tones :

'Is Johnson there?'

I suppose an affirmative reply came back, for in a moment he continued :

'Tell him to take in more coal, draw out and bring No. 537 to platform seven at once, and await orders.'

Then I heard him issue instructions for a guard to be in readiness, and yet a third mandate for the road to be cleared. His coolness and promptitude gave me great comfort ; I felt I was in someone's hands who would

expedite things as much as possible. Next he turned to me :

‘ Your name and address, please ?’

I gave him them, and he touched a spring bell. A clerk came in as quickly as if he had been awaiting the summons.

‘ Make out a receipt for that gentleman ’—handing him my card—‘ for fifty pounds on account of a special train to Mallowfield. Bring it to me on platform seven at once.’

He rapidly filled up some forms and other papers, and then, turning to me, said :

‘ Now, Mr. Clifford !’

I obeyed the summons with alacrity, and we were soon threading our way amongst animated groups of people on an interminable length of platform, and at times I had to run to keep pace with Mr. Hardcastle, for he dodged the opposing crowd with practised ease.

Soon, turning sharply to one side, we

went through an archway, and were in comparative tranquillity.

I tried to thank him heartily, but he cut me short brusquely but kindly :

‘ You are very fortunate. I had an engine waiting with steam up, and you can go down behind the afternoon mail. A special has never been despatched on such short notice before, but I am going beyond my province on account of the accident, and the line is tolerably clear at this time. You are not particular about a saloon, I suppose ?’

‘ Oh no,’ I answered with emphasis ; ‘ a cattle truck would do if it would save time !’

He smiled at my earnestness, and came to a halt. Two or three men brought messages, and presently up steamed one of those fine engines for which the London and Great North Midland are so celebrated. Resplendent with polished metal, it seemed a living creature with the steam blowing off at the safety-valve im-

patiently, as if the engine contained a fiery, imprisoned spirit that was anxious to be off, like a Derby favourite fretting and fuming before the fall of the flag.

A guard was only now screwing up the last coupling between the engine and a first-class carriage, to which was attached a guard's van, and Mr. Hardcastle was evidently waiting for somebody. He remarked sympathetically :

‘I hope you will not find things so bad as you expect.’

Just then a man hurried up with a paper. Mr. Hardcastle took it, glanced through it, spoke to the engine-driver, and then drew me aside a moment.

‘I have made the driver understand you want to get to Mallowfield with the least possible delay. You need say nothing to him, except,’ he added significantly, ‘when you get there, if you like.’

A semaphore arm fell with a crash, and Mr.

Hardcastle opened the door of a compartment for me, the guard standing respectfully by. I sprang in, the door was shut, he held out his hand, and I wrung it hard with gratitude. He himself gave the signal, 'Right away!' to the driver, the engine snorted, and we moved slowly out of the station.

The speed gradually increased to an accompaniment of piercing shrieks of the whistle, the throbbing of the engine getting more rapid every minute, while Stygian darkness alternating with gleams of murky daylight surrounded us.

Presently we got clear of tunnels and opposing signals, and the speed grew higher and higher. With such a light load the engine flashed through the suburban stations like a meteor, our coming barely heralded by a shrill blast, before we seemed to have passed each of them. Now and again occurred a temporary check, a slackening of speed pre-

ceded by fearful whistling, as if the engine and the driver personally resented any hindrance to our progress.

Once clear of the suburbs, we appeared to fly, and in the obscurity of the fading daylight I could not distinguish the objects we passed, while the pulsations of the engine were now no longer distinct, but were blended into one continuous roar.

It was a strange, weird journey in the deepening gloom in this hurrying train, ever and again darting through a station, whose echoing walls reverberated back the sound ; now tearing past some blood-red signals standing out brilliantly against the darkening sky ; now passing under a bridge that was a mere flash and was gone ; now shooting with a whirr and a rattle past an express, whose windows appeared to be one continuous line of light from the speed in passing ; and now banging violently over some switch, as if the

engine would leave the metals ! But I knew no fear : Blanche was dying and wanted me ; I would have gone in a dynamite shell or a war rocket if there had been a reasonable prospect of reaching Mallowfield in safety.

The suspense was dreadful. I smoked furiously, and paced up and down the narrow limits of the compartment like a wild beast. I could not be resigned to Blanche's death, even though I knew it to be inevitable ; but what troubled me most was, I feared that I might arrive too late.

If I could only be in time to hold her hand in life, to ask her forgiveness again, and to soothe and minister to her last hours, I knew I should feel less contrition and self-reproach. Scoffer as I am, I prayed earnestly that she might live until my arrival—not for my own, but for her sake.

The flying train was annihilating space, and in the distance was drawing near the

dusky glow reflected from the smoky pall overhanging a big manufacturing town. Presently the speed slackened, and after some tedious delays, which nearly drove me out of my senses, I was strung up to such a pitch of excitement, we steamed slowly into Blackingham, where I had to diverge from the main line, and travel down a branch to Mallowfield.

We were expected, for some officials came and spoke to the guard and driver, and presently the former walked up to my carriage, and said :

‘ We cannot possibly go on, sir, for five or ten minutes. Would you like to get out ? ’

I had no ambition to exhibit myself, for the station was half full of people inquiring about the accident, and my train was beginning to attract attention ; but I felt exhausted with emotion and the effects of my late illness, so I entered the refreshment-

room, and had a large brandy-and-soda. The lights and cheerful bustle around me were a pleasant contrast to my dimly-lighted, lonely compartment, and I dreaded a return to solitude and my own thoughts; so I decided to travel the rest of the way with the guard, and learn all the particulars I could.

I made this clear to him with the aid of half a sovereign, and in a few seconds we were on our way again. Primed with some brandy from my flask, which I had replenished, and provided with a big Havana, he grew communicative and confidential.

Pressed as to the cause of the accident, he replied :

‘ It’s the old story, sir : a broken crank-axle, that has run some hundreds of thousands of miles, and yet is expected to last for ever, so as to save a few pounds, while the directors and superintendents draw big salaries. I

don't go for to say but what they cut us down well enough, too; but I do say, sir,' he continued, warming to his subject, 'that they haven't no right to risk our lives and passengers' lives just to show a bit of cheese-paring in the balance-sheet. Every driving-axle ought to be taken down and examined at regular intervals, and when they've run a certain mileage, they ought to go on the scrap-heap.

'Why, if one of us poor chaps,' he went on, 'in a signal-box, on duty for sixteen and eighteen hours maybe, and worn out with fatigue, makes a mistake, which is a thing as the best on us is liable to at times, he gets punished for manslaughter; and yet here are these 'ere directors and managers and superintendents actually risking people's lives in cold blood every day. Shame on 'em! and you mark my words, sir, unless the Government takes it up, some day or other there'll be

a whole trainful of 'em going off on some pleasure trip, which they call business, or inspection, or something, and the axle 'll go for a judgment on them, and then them what's left alive will know the reason why.'

'Yes,' I said, cutting him short; 'but tell me about the accident.'

'I haven't heard much, sir,' he said ungraciously, as if unwilling to drop his theme; 'but they do say as how, when the engine left the metals, the coaches all crushed into it and one another, as if they was matchboxes. Only four killed, and twenty injured, but so badly that the butcher's bill will go up another dozen, they say, at least!'

I said nothing, and the man went on feelingly :

'I hope, sir, your friend or relation ain't amongst that lot? While there's life there's hope, you know. My mate as goes down the

other branch was telling me of a lady—a rare plucked one, and no mistake !’

‘What was her name ?’ I asked curiously, with a queer sensation in my throat.

‘Hanland, or Harland, or some such name,’ the guard answered. ‘I know it ended with “land,” but I’m not rightly sure of the first part.’

It was Blanche, my heart told me. I inquired eagerly :

‘What did she do ?’

‘Why, sir,’ he replied, ‘she was caught by the back between two timbers, and the perspiration was a-rolling off her face with the pain, but she never complained nor called out ; and when they went to get her out, she says, “No ; go and help those poor people who are shrieking so. I know I am injured fatally, but there may be a chance for them.” And, if you’ll believe me, sir, when the doctors come, she wouldn’t let ’em come nigh

her not until she knew that everybody else had been attended to, and was as right as they could make 'em. She never thought for herself. And she told 'em to get out her purse, and get all the poor people everything they wanted, and never stint 'em for nothing! Now, there's a brave woman for you! I wish there was a few more like her! Damn it, sir, she ought to have a monument, and I'd give a day's pay towards it and welcome!

The man spoke with the warmth and feeling of evident sincerity.

My noble-hearted Blanche, good to the last! I cannot help it—perhaps I am tender-hearted—but my throat seemed to close up and tears filled my eyes. The guard saw it, and said, with rough but kindly concern :

‘ Not your wife, sir, was she ?’

I shook my head, and he again asked with sympathetic curiosity :

‘ You was keeping company, perhaps ?’

I turned away without answering, that he should not see any more of my emotion, and I heard him mutter :

‘ Well, she was one to be proud of, whoever she was ! ’

CHAPTER XXXV.

PRESENTLY we came to a peremptory stop, with all signals set against us, at a small wayside station, which the guard explained was the second from Mallowfield. Engine-driver and guard both dismounted, and I heard them arguing with an obstinate old fool of a station-master. Mallowfield was still six miles away, with a station intervening ; and so, learning that there was no train ahead on the down line, they took their places, and, in defiance of signals and his feeble remonstrances, the whistle blew, and we were again speeding on into the night.

The next station reached, we found still

more energetic opposition to our progress; and I jumped out to intercede personally, for we were still three miles away, and the delay was maddening, when the driver produced the instructions Mr. Hardcastle had given him. The station-master gingerly got out a pair of spectacles, and proceeded to read the paper with irritating deliberation, scrutinizing it with great care, and even spelling out the official stamp that denoted from which department the order emanated, while I was trembling with impatience; but I knew it was no use interfering: it would only have caused more delay. At last he was satisfied, and we moved off again, after ascertaining the precise locality of the accident.

There was no need to warn me that the scene of the catastrophe was approaching. With head and half my body out of the window, I was peering into the night, watching anxiously for the first indications.

At length I could see flickering luminous points in the distance, which gradually grew larger, until the explosion of three fog-signals startled me. Steam was instantly shut off, and I could hear the brakes grinding on the wheels.

When we came to a stand, the driver descended and held a short consultation with the guard, which resulted in the former coming up to me, and saying he must not go any further, as he did not know whether the permanent way was all right, but that the guard would accompany me with his lamp.

Making the driver a liberal present, I waited eagerly for the guard, as I was impatient to be getting there. Directly he made his appearance, we started off in the direction of the lights, while he roughly but kindly admonished me to bear up, as I might see some queer sights, 'and a drop of brandy now would put heart into you.' I tried his pre-

scription, and, passing the flask, told him to help himself.

We tramped on steadily, and the lights drew nearer and nearer, until we could distinctly make them out to be the fires kindled by the workers from the remains of the smashed-up carriages. The engine had left the track and fallen upon its side, where it lay like some huge monster in disgrace, conscious of the mischief it had wrought. The down line was almost clear, and a break-down gang were steadily at work, removing the *débris* and repairing the damaged rails.

I took the whole picture in rapidly, shuddering as I saw here and there dark patches on the ballast that could be nothing else than blood! What a scene to disfigure the peaceful little village! On reaching the men at work, my companion asked a porter, who was begrimed with his exertions:

‘Bill, this gentleman wants to see Miss

Harland. Do you know where they have took her to ?'

The man looked puzzled, and I interposed :
' Miss Haviland.'

' Oh yes, sir,' he replied with alacrity ; ' I'll soon show you, if you'll come with me !'

My friend the guard seemed unwilling to leave me, but his duties were inexorable. I remembered his opinion of poor Blanche, and consoled him with a present that made his eyes open with astonishment.

Then I stepped out quickly by the side of the porter, who was sympathetic enough to ask no questions. He was a strange guide, suggestive of a miner just up from the pit-bottom, and the red, uncertain glare of the fires made him look like a gnome ; indeed, there was a weird fascination about the whole scene, rendering it a fit subject for a painter's canvas ; but I had no time or heart to study or admire it.

He only remarked that messengers had been constantly backwards and forwards to inquire if anything had been heard of a gentleman arriving, and then we walked on in silence through a short cutting. We descended an embankment, and steered for a farmhouse, where every window was lighted up.

I felt less troubled ; I had an inward conviction that Blanche's anxiety to see me would sustain her until my arrival. We reached the house, and entered the porch ; the door was open, and we went in. The passage was littered with rugs and shawls, damaged and stained ; and here and there a box and portmanteau, broken and shattered, spoke eloquently of the disaster. A kind, motherly-looking woman came out of a room, laden with bandages and a jug ; but her face had a scared, drawn look, as if she were quite unaccustomed to such painful scenes.

The porter spoke to her.

‘Missis, this be the gentleman for Miss Haviland.’

She laid down her burdens, and put up her apron to her eyes, sobbing out :

‘Deary, deary me ! such a fine-looking young man, and that poor sainted dear !’

Then she burst into a fresh fit of weeping, and nothing more was to be extracted from her, when a door opened, and out stepped a grave-looking man, with experience of suffering stamped upon his face. With quiet decision he motioned her to one side, and, coming up to me, said :

‘May I ask your name ?’

‘Clifford,’ I replied promptly ; ‘I want to see Miss Haviland.’

‘Yes, certainly,’ he answered ; ‘but I should like to speak to you first. Will you come this way ?’ and he led me into an antiquated parlour, with its queer ornaments and general air of never being used. Closing

the door, he asked abruptly : ‘ You know the worst ? ’

‘ She is not dead ! ’ I gasped wildly and incredulously.

‘ No,’ he answered, ‘ but she will not live through the night. Her spine is seriously injured, and we can do nothing for her except to alleviate the pain. She is anxious to see you ; but can you be calm ? for excitement and emotion will make her worse.’

‘ I will do my utmost, doctor,’ I replied, bracing myself with a mighty effort.

‘ You will find her tranquil ; she has a wonderful temperament ; she has borne patiently and uncomplainingly with agony that would have killed women of the ordinary calibre. She is brave and self-denying. Try and be the same ; think only of her, and bear up like a man.’

I nodded assent—my heart was too full for words—and as we ascended the stairs I

prayed for strength and fortitude. The doctor opened a bedroom-door and went in, leaving me a moment on the landing. He came out and motioned me to go in.

I entered silently and reverently. It was a large old-fashioned room with a low ceiling. The delicious clean sweetness of everything that had been kept in lavender was marred by the subtle odour of chloroform. On the bed lay Blanche, unchanged but for her deadly pallor and bloodless lips.

Her face softened into a faint pleased smile, as she welcomed me with :

‘ Bertie dear, I am so glad you’ve come.’

I could not speak—I should have broken down utterly ; but I bent down and kissed her with my whole heart in that one kiss.

A tear must have fallen upon her, for she said :

‘ Don’t cry, it is for the best, and I have much to say to you while I have strength, for I have only lived to see you. Listen to

me, dearest, and come nearer, for I am very weak.' I took her hand, and stooped so that I could catch her faintest whisper, and she proceeded: 'Since I have been lying here, I have seen everything in so different a light. I scorned and despised poor Vera Marchmont; now I pity her from the bottom of my heart, and I will make reparation. Would you marry her if you were in a position to do so? Don't interrupt me, darling, with useless protestations, but just answer my question.'

'Not while I have you. If I could only make amends to you, my love, my dearest one——' I faltered, breaking down completely at the end of the sentence.

Tears, idle tears, however, cannot alter the past. Blanche paused a moment until I had checked my grief, and then pressed the point:

'But if I left you a sufficient income, and solemnly enjoined on you to make her an honest woman, you could be happy with her?'

‘Yes,’ I answered; ‘I would marry Vera if you wished it so much.’

‘But could you be happy with her?’ Blanche persisted.

‘Yes, I could,’ I admitted, half unwillingly.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Blanche earnestly. ‘Don’t tell me half-truths now, dear one.’

‘I will speak frankly,’ I answered. ‘I could be happy with her, and it would make her very happy indeed.’

‘Then, Bertie dear,’ continued Blanche faintly, ‘I have left you enough for you both to live on in comfort.’

‘It is too good of you!’ I exclaimed. ‘If I had only been worthy of your kindness!’

‘Will you promise me?’ she asked. ‘I only want your promise that you will make her your wife.’

‘Blanche,’ I replied, solemnly and emphatically, ‘as I shall one day be in the same

condition as you are now, and as I shall need mercy, I promise you sacredly that I will obey your wishes and marry Vera Marchmont !'

'That is sufficient,' Blanche replied ; ' I can die in peace. But one thing more : Go to her soon, marry her, and set the poor child's mind at rest. It is of far more consequence than anything you can do for me when I am gone.'

' I promise, dearest,' I said.

' Tell her I forgive her, as I ask her forgiveness for all the hard things I have thought of her, and say that my dying prayers were for her and your happiness. Try to do what is right,' Blanche went on ; ' it brings its own reward. My love to Mrs. Fawcett and Harry. And now will you fetch me the clergyman ? I don't know his name. He has been so kind, I should like to see him again.'

Her voice was growing fainter, and I was reluctant to leave her ; but I flew out of the room, and fortunately I encountered him.

Then I went in search of the doctor, and returned with him in a minute or two. He administered some restorative, and Blanche revived again.

‘Bertie,’ she said pathetically, ‘I should like you to hold me in your arms, like—like you used to do. It isn’t wrong, is it,’ she added, addressing the divine, ‘to think so much of earthly love?’

Hardened by experience as he was, his eyes were full of tears and his voice unsteady as he answered :

‘No, my dear lady, no. God is merciful beyond the narrow limits we may set to His goodness.’

I took her in my arms, and pressed her to my heart in one fervent, gentle embrace, kissing her tenderly ; but it was too much, for she sighed with a subdued groan :

‘Oh, the pain!’

I laid her carefully down, and wiped the

perspiration with my handkerchief from her pallid brow.

‘My favourite scent,’ she murmured feebly. ‘Bertie, good-bye!’ and she relapsed into an unconsciousness that was like death itself.

‘Let us pray!’ said the clergyman, in low, reverent tones.

I knelt by the bed, still holding Blanche’s hand, sobbing inwardly with a convulsive violence that shook me as I endeavoured to stifle it, and I listened with more attention to his prayer than I had ever paid to anything religious before.

I kept my eyes on Blanche. There was no marked alteration, except that her respiration grew fainter, and when we rose from our knees she had passed away.

Sic itur ad astra!

Need I be ashamed to confess it? My tears are falling fast on these pages. I have not the heart to write any more!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

My chambers.

I WILL not describe the succeeding events in detail. I had to see Mrs. Fawcett and her son Harry, who had been taken to another house, suffering from injuries and the shock. Willingly would I have avoided the interviews, but there was no escape, and I had to undergo two painful scenes. They knew something, but not all, of what had happened between Blanche and myself, and they could not realize my poignant feelings of remorse. They supposed I was deeply in love with her, which of course they admired in me, and so I was; but the remembrance of all her goodness, and my

treacherous, ungrateful return for it, will haunt me to my dying day. Thank Heaven, we parted as friends !

Poor Blanche was buried at Woodsleigh.

At length I came back here to fulfil her behest as to letting Vera know of the happiness in store for her. I could have written the good news of course ; but I could not deny myself the pleasure of telling her them, and seeing her delight with my own eyes.

I felt very depressed on my journey back to town, it reminded me so acutely of my coming down, my sad errand ; but I grew more cheerful as I thought of Vera and the happiness I was taking her.

At the earliest moment I drove to S. Veronica's. It was a large, old-fashioned building, standing in grounds surrounded by a high wall, whose only entrance was a severe-looking door studded with heavy iron bolts. I applied my knuckles, and even my boots, to

this without any effect, and at last I turned the handle boldly and went in.

A flagged footpath divided an exquisitely-kept lawn that might have been the envy of many a college don, and led to a door in the building of similar pretensions to the outer one, but by the side of it hung a mediæval iron bell-pull. I rang, and was alarmed at the fearful peal that resulted—it might have been a fire-bell or a tocsin calling to arms !

The door was soon opened, and a female figure in the decidedly unprepossessing garb of the Order stood before me. I asked if I could see Sister Agatha, and the woman, with a wise discretion, answered that if I would come in she would go and see.

I entered, and on the left I discerned a small but beautifully decorated chapel, from which emerged the sweet fragrance of incense ; then the sister returned, cutting short my

scrutiny, and said the Lady Directress would see me.

I was shown into a large bleak hall, which from its general aspect—the pulpit in one corner, and the long tables—I took to be the refectory, and I was asked to be seated.

After a short interval, a venerable lady came in, and, with a courteous greeting, took a seat near me. Her hair had that beautiful snowy whiteness which is always admired, and her refined, intellectual face—pale and thin to asceticism—denoted much knowledge of the world and keen judgment; while she had a pair of steady gray eyes that I should not have liked to face, had I come on some treacherous errand. She had doffed the hideous linen head-dress.

‘Mr. Clifford, I suppose?’ she said in clear, measured tones, referring to my card, ‘and you wish to see Sister Agatha?’

I bowed assent to the first proposition, and politely intimated in reply to the second that such was the object of my desires. I had, I should mention, written to Vera, informing her of Blanche's death.

‘I may tell you,’ the Mother said, ‘that Sister Agatha has caused me much anxiety lately. She has only been in indifferent health, but this I believe to have been caused by mental trouble. In addition to seeking Divine consolation, I have pressed her to confide in me, but so far unavailingly.’

I thought to myself, ‘No, my dear lady, and with good reason, if you only knew all;’ but I contented myself with expressing my regret in a conventional tone.

‘I cannot,’ she continued, ‘forecast the result of your seeing her, or pretend to inquire into the motives that prompt your visit; but I am entitled, I think, to ask in what relation you stand to her?’

‘I cannot say more,’ I replied, ‘than that I am a very dear friend—that I am deeply interested in her. I am intimate with her relatives, and they would, I am sure, approve of the course I am taking.’

This was assumption on my part, for beyond Mrs. Vaughan I had never heard Vera speak of a single one.

‘Sister Agatha told me,’ the Directress interposed, ‘that she had no relations.’

‘She has but two,’ I replied suavely, ‘and those distant ones; and I imagine that when a lady becomes a member of your admirable institution, she is supposed to turn her back upon the world, so that Sister Agatha might have felt justified in saying so.’

‘Well, perhaps that is a detail,’ she rejoined; ‘but my action is prompted solely by a desire for her welfare. Sister Agatha asked me to see you, and I am sorely exercised to know whether an interview with you will

conduce to her peace of mind. Forgive me, my son, if I speak to you frankly ; but your face is one to influence any woman's affections, though I regret your appearance compels me to think your life has not been devoted to sober living and good works.'

This was so palpably euphemistic an expression for dissipated-looking that I smiled.

'Nowhere,' she continued, 'but in the bosom of our holy Mother Church, engaged in its daily work and devotion, can true peace be found. Sister Agatha will, I believe and pray, find this peace. Am I to let you agitate her unless it is for something of the last importance ? Let me appeal to your better feelings, and ask you if you really wish an interview that may disturb her mind for weeks ?'

'My dear lady,' I replied emphatically, 'your consideration for her touches me greatly, and I thank you in her name ; but

I assure you that my business is so important, that, were this place a fortified castle, my first step after leaving without being allowed to see her would be to make preparations for its siege and capture, at whatever cost of time, men, or money !’

‘ You speak warmly,’ the Mother remarked; and then, drawing nearer to me, she asked abruptly : ‘ Are you her husband ?’

I was prepared for something like this, and I answered coldly :

‘ No ; on my honour I am not.’

‘ Her lover ?’—more sharply.

‘ I was,’ I answered ; ‘ but I cannot lay claim to that now.’

‘ You fence with me !’ the Abbess exclaimed. ‘ Does she love you ?’

‘ I have every reason to suppose so,’ I said, enjoying her surprise at my sudden frankness.

‘ Yet you seek an interview that will no doubt make her restless and dissatisfied. Is it wise, is it kind ?’

‘ I can cure her mental distress,’ I retorted. ‘ I am come in obedience to the mandate of a dying woman, and I shall never willingly leave this place without seeing her.’

‘ Will you not tell me your motive ?’ the mother pleaded ; ‘ why be so reticent ? I have had a long experience of stories of wrong and suffering ; confide in me, and let me decide for the best.’

‘ After all,’ I reflected, ‘ I need not make a mystery of it,’ so I answered, smiling :

‘ I will do that with pleasure, and I think I can trust myself to your judgment. Sister Agatha and I loved one another devotedly some time ago, but unfortunate circumstances prevented our marriage. The obstacles have now been removed, and I have come to ask her to be my wife.’

‘Oh, that alters the case,’ the Mother exclaimed, with an expression of true womanly delight—first at finding out the secret, and next at the prospect of a love-match. ‘Why didn’t you say so before? I am heartily glad to hear it! Sister Agatha was doing very well, but she was not fitted for our work, and it was telling upon her health and spirits. She is a dear creature, but she has not sufficient self-abnegation for her heart to be thoroughly with us. She is of a temperament that clings to someone, that craves to love and be loved, and she wants something more than the sisterly and Christian regard which is all we have time to give one another. Shall I tell her the good news?’ she asked eagerly.

‘My dear lady,’ I began with grim politeness, ‘I don’t want to be selfish; but as in some ways this is an act of reparation on my part, I had counted on that pleasure myself.’ She looked disappointed, so, relenting, I con-

tinued, 'Still, you have been so kind to her that I cannot refuse.'

The Mother Superior disappeared at once, and I had to wait, reflecting on the pleasures of anticipation, and preparing myself for Vera's appearance in the frightful costume of the home. I waited some time, but no Vera came, and I began to fear the shock had been too much for her.'

Suddenly the door opened, and Vera appeared—not in the sombre garments I had expected, but in a neat, becoming dress.

'*Bertie!*' she exclaimed, in indescribable accents.

'My own darling!' I answered affectionately, as I took her to my heart.

Holding her as if I should never let her go, I kissed her again and again; while, with her head laid on my shoulder, and her whole frame convulsed with emotion and happiness and relief, she sobbed out:

‘ I cannot believe it — oh, my darling !
Heaven is too merciful—thank God !’

Before long we became aware of the presence of the Directress, who had followed Vera after a discreet interval. She stood regarding us with moist eyes, while she made the sign of the cross, and almost inaudibly invoked a blessing on us. Vera disengaged herself, and looked modest and a little ashamed.

‘ My child,’ the Mother said to her affectionately, ‘ I have comforted you in your affliction, let me be privileged to witness your happiness !’

Vera looked such a dear little, trembling, tender creature, radiant and blushing at her new-found happiness, that I loved her more devotedly than ever I did. Her face, though thin, had no careworn expression, and I promised myself that a few weeks’ change would soon restore her to complete health.

She said :

‘Dearest Mother, how can I ever thank you sufficiently for all your goodness?’

‘By not mentioning it again,’ answered that good-hearted woman promptly.

‘Oh, but I must,’ Vera answered eagerly. ‘Why, Bertie, just now, when I wanted to rush down to you without waiting an instant, she persuaded me to change my dress, so that I might look all the nicer in your *dear* eyes!’ giving my hand, which she had never let go, an affectionate squeeze.

‘Hush, my child,’ said the Mother gaily, ‘or Mr. Clifford will be shocked at my worldliness.’ Then she continued: ‘You will have to keep a tight hand on your husband, Agatha; I think he wants a wife to look after him.’

‘My dear Mother,’ I replied, taking her hand and stooping and pressing my lips to it reverently, ‘grant me your blessing and your prayers, and with those and my darling’s

love I will be a better man in the future than I have been in the past.'

'I shall always remember you both,' she replied, 'and you shall have my earnest prayers for your welfare and happiness. Now I shall leave you, for which I expect you will be very thankful,' and shaking me warmly by the hand, she retired.

When she had gone, Vera threw herself into my arms again in raptures of joy. She clung to me and kissed me, and, I am convinced, called me by every endearing name there is in the English language.

'It seems far too good to be true,' she said fondly; 'I cannot realize it. I am raised from the depth of misery to the very topmost pinnacle of happiness!'

Then we talked on about everything, and I told Vera all the details of poor Blanche's sad end. She cried softly, and was deeply touched by her generosity and her last

messages ; but she had such an overmastering sense of happiness that nothing could damp her spirits or sadden her for long.

I had not said anything so far about the time of our marriage, but when I spoke of going, Vera asked tremulously :

‘ Oh, dearest, when is it to be—when are we to be married ? Don’t think, darling, I want to show the least disrespect to poor Miss Haviland’s memory, but,’ she added, with a blush, ‘ you know how much it is to me !’

‘ Well, dear,’ I answered, ‘ I think there is time to get a license at Doctors’ Commons to-day, and then we might be married to-morrow.’

‘ Bertie !’ Vera exclaimed in tones of surprise, ‘ that is much too soon. I could not possibly marry you so soon after poor Miss Haviland’s death.’

‘ You don’t know Blanche’s large-hearted-

ness,' I answered. 'It was she who urged me to come and let you know at once, so as to save you further pain and anxiety; and if she can see me now, she will be gratified by the course I am taking. People may misjudge us, but we are independent of everyone's opinion. Blanche was an incomparable woman for unselfishness and high-mindedness !'

'Take care, sir,' interposed Vera, with a pretended pout, 'or I shall be jealous if you talk like that !'

'You won't be too exacting, Vera dear,' I said insinuatingly, although I knew I could twist her round my little finger; 'I am not perfect, you know, but I will do my best to make you happy.'

'My darling !' she answered, with deep feeling, 'if I can only make you happy I shall be content, for you know how I love you !'

‘Where would you like to be married?’ I asked; ‘here, or in the City, where my chambers will afford me the necessary residential qualification?’

‘Oh, here, Bertie, if you wouldn’t mind!’ Vera replied eagerly, womanlike, anxious to show off her lover to the sisters at the Home.

‘Is your chapel licensed for marriages?’ I inquired.

‘Yes,’ Vera replied; ‘some poor people were married in it only the other day.’

‘Well, shall we say to-morrow? You will have no time to get any dresses, but you look very nice, darling,’ I said, kissing her; ‘and don’t you think, for your own sake, the sooner the ceremony is over the better?’

‘I have thought of that, dearest,’ she confessed, hiding her blushing face on my breast; ‘and although I protested, I really wished it all the time. It seems so strange and in-

credible, this new happiness, that I fear sometimes it is a dream, and may all fade away. I shall not know a moment's rest until we are really married. I don't like to let you go out of my sight, my dear one!' she continued, clinging to me with nervous anxiety, 'lest anything should happen to you, and then what would become of me and my poor nameless child? Oh, darling! do take care of yourself, and don't meet with any accident; don't run any risks between now and tomorrow, but come back safely, do!'

I assured her I had no intention of placing my life in jeopardy, beyond the ordinary dangers attendant upon hansom cabs and Metropolitan trains; and leaving her to make arrangements for the ceremony with the Mother, I departed for Doctors' Commons, where I obtained the license after a good deal of trouble, which surprised me, as I expected—so business-like are we nowadays

—to go into an office, say, ‘I want a license, please,’ and receiving it, put the fees on the counter, and leave with the document in my pocket.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

I HAVE often wondered what a bridegroom's sensations are as he undergoes the ceremony, and now I know, only that the exceptional circumstances in my case may have altered the feeling entirely. I was nervous, I might well be ; the little chapel was filled to overflowing with a crowd of the sisters, for Vera had endeared herself to them all, and they had mustered in force at the celebration. And they had by no means completely divested themselves of the world, the flesh, and the devil ; for they took a deep interest in the proceedings, and scrutinized and criticised us as closely as any Belgravian damsels

might a fortunate sister who had landed the big fish—the *parti* of the season.

The surroundings were hardly what I should have chosen myself, as the effect of the sombre garb of the order was depressing to one not used to seeing it in quantity; but what they lacked in appearance, the sisters made up for in animation and kindness, while instead of the funereal behaviour I had anticipated, they were cheerful almost to irreverence.

How Vera had explained our hurried union to the Mother, I don't know yet; perhaps in her delight and gladness she may have revealed the whole story, but I trow not. The excitement after the strain of anxiety was too much for her; for as the first notes of the Wedding March pealed from the organ, she exclaimed 'Thank God!' and fainted. She was soon revived, however, by the attentions of the sisters, and seemed all right.

The Mother gave her away, my friend Meredith supported me, and the service was choral ; the officiating priest's intonation was better than any I ever heard out of a Roman Catholic fane, and the incense was *de la qualité extra supérieure*.

We had decided for Vera to remain at the Home for a few days, as I had had no time to make any arrangements, and we should probably travel. So after the ceremony was all over, and the Mother had smilingly put aside my profuse thanks, and accepted gratefully a substantial contribution to their funds, I said a most affectionate farewell to Vera, and took my leave.

On reaching my chambers, I found a letter from poor Blanche's solicitors, an old and highly respectable firm in Lincoln's Inn Fields, requesting me to do them the favour of calling that afternoon, if it was convenient ; so, having nothing

particular to do, I made my way to their offices.

I was greeted with an effusion and deference that was as gratifying as it was perplexing. Who was I, a mere briefless barrister, that I should be bowed here, and shown there as if I were a duke, unless poor Blanche had left me something handsome ?

Presently I reached the holy of holies, the private room of the senior partner, Mr. Pouncet, who rose and shook hands.

After exchanging condolences on the subject of Miss Haviland, he continued :

‘ I asked you to come and see me this afternoon, because I have been put in possession of Miss Haviland’s last wishes, and I thought it only right to acquaint you with them at the earliest possible moment. You know a Miss—er—um—Marchmont ?’

He had put on his pince-nez, and was fumbling amongst his papers.

‘I know no one of that name,’ I answered as if surprised; the temptation to mystify him, dignified and pompous as he was, was irresistible.

‘Dear me, dear me,’ he replied in evident perplexity, ‘this is very extraordinary! Why, my late client’s last wishes were, that you should marry this Miss Marchmont!’

‘I really don’t know any Miss Marchmont,’ I answered solemnly, though the inclination to laugh was nearly overpowering me.

‘Can’t you throw any light at all on this seemingly remarkable wish of Miss Haviland’s?’ Mr. Pouncet asked helplessly. ‘Surely you must know something about it?’

‘Yes, I do,’ I replied, laughing at his discomfiture. ‘I cannot possibly marry Miss Marchmont, because I married her this morning, and she is now Mrs. Clifford. See for yourself;’ and I put the certificate, which I happened to have in my pocket, on his table.

He would have liked to have laughed too, but was afraid of compromising his dignity. He began to peruse the certificate, remarking deprecatingly and disapprovingly :

‘ This is—er—decidedly precipitate, Mr. Clifford ; your regard for my client, the late Miss Haviland, must have been very small to allow you to marry so soon, almost immediately I may say, after her unfortunate and painful death !’

‘ Mr. Pouncet,’ I answered courteously but very decidedly, ‘ what I have done was in accordance with Miss Haviland’s solemn injunctions, and any apparently indecent haste was due to her own wish. You can hardly suppose me capable of showing so little respect for her memory, except at her own urgent dying request. The ceremony this morning was as quiet as it was possible for it to be ; and I think if poor Miss Haviland gave any instructions since the accident, you

will find she betrays the anxiety for our early marriage that prompted its celebration !'

He listened apparently unconvinced, and began deliberately scanning a long closely-written paper—not in Blanche's handwriting, I knew her bold firm characters too well—and he remarked as he read on :

' Er—um—yes, perhaps you are justified in what you have done.'

Finally, with an expression of surprise, Mr. Pouncet put the document down, and stared curiously at me.

' Did you ever hear Miss Haviland speak of the Mayfield property ?' he asked.

' No, not that I can remember,' I answered carelessly, ' Miss Haviland very rarely mentioned her property, for she had such confidence in your firm, that I think she never troubled about business matters at all. Why should she single out this particular possession ?'

‘Were you with her recently before the accident?’ he asked.

‘No,’ I said; ‘I came up to town four days before it.’

‘She did not mention it,’ he persisted strangely, ‘when you went down to Mallowfield?’

‘My dear sir,’ I answered impatiently—I could not bear discussing the subject—‘she was at the point of death, and in no condition to trouble her mind about worldly affairs. Whatever has all this got to do with me?’

‘Patience, my friend,’ he replied soothingly; ‘it has a great deal more to do with you than you think. I suppose you are telling me the truth?’ he added, looking searchingly at me.

‘I hope I am not in the habit of doing anything else!’ I retorted indignantly and haughtily.

‘I believe you,’ he replied heartily, holding out his hand, ‘and I respect your motives.’

Taken by surprise, and not knowing the circumstances, I thought your marriage at least indecorous, then I feared a mercenary inducement; but I am glad to find I am mistaken on both points. The reason for my questioning you is this: Two days before the accident happened I had a communication from the solicitors of the late Sir Joseph Mayfield, Bart., apprising me of his death, and adding that under the provisions of his will my client, Miss Haviland, inherited a share of the estate, estimated to produce some two thousand pounds per annum.'

'And pray how does that concern me?' I interrupted, weary of listening.

'You shall know all in good time,' he replied blandly. 'I must tell you the story connectedly. I wrote to Miss Haviland at once, informing her that she was the devisee of this property. My letter would reach her the morning before the accident.'

‘Yes,’ I thought to myself, ‘and the first thing she does is to think of me, and send me a cheque for five hundred pounds.’ But I said nothing.

‘I don’t know whether you are aware,’ continued Mr. Pouncet, ‘that Miss Haviland’s will has been made and in our hands for some months. In it you are named as sole legatee, subject to one or two trifling bequests; but this one I hold in my hand, being of later date, of course cancels the other. There could not be a subsequent one, as you say Miss Haviland was *in extremis* when you reached Mallowfield. However, the will I have here,’ he repeated, ‘drawn by a solicitor who was in the train, and properly attested by two medical men, in no way alters the provisions of the earlier one, but confirms it, and consequently you occupy the enviable position of inheriting Miss Haviland’s whole fortune, which, as you know, was considerable.’

‘Do you really mean this?’ I interrupted, in great surprise; for after the *contretemps* with Lisette and the others, I thought Blanche would have been sure to have made an alteration, and that the second will would simply give me a modest income, enough to marry Vera on. ‘Do you mean that Miss Haviland has left me her whole fortune unconditionally?’

‘Yes,’ he answered, with conviction; ‘but that is not all. I will not go into details, but pass on to the remainder of what I may call the Mallowfield will, which is mainly a disposition of the Mayfield property I told you about just now. The principal clause affecting you provides that if, within the space of six weeks from the date of Miss Haviland’s death, you voluntarily, without compulsion, pressure, or influence, and of your own free will, *in ignorance of this provision*, do marry Miss Vera Marchmont, you

are also to inherit the Mayfield property, which, as I said before, is worth some two thousand pounds per annum. Failing the marriage taking place within the stipulated period, the property is to go to my late client's next of kin ; who is, I believe, a very uncouth, unpleasant old Scotch laird, very well off, and a regular miser. Now, sir,' he continued, 'I congratulate you very heartily ; you have fulfilled the injunction in that second will to the letter—nay, even beyond it, by the alacrity with which you have executed Miss Haviland's last wishes, and you are now in possession of what I may term the very respectable income of five thousand pounds per annum, more or less, besides a considerable sum of accumulated money.'

This intelligence certainly was agreeably startling, and after thanking Mr. Pouncet and begging him to act for me in the future, I let him give me a cheque for five hundred

pounds, so as to feel the pleasure of actual possession. I then went out and wired the good news to Vera.

It is gratifying to know I am very rich ; but it won't bring back Blanche, it won't make up for her loss, it won't take away the bitter remorse I feel ! Ah, if the time could only come over again !

I cannot rush out like a child that has been given a shilling, and spend money on sweets and toys. All I can do is to drink Pommery instead of good bitter beer, and order some cigars, which I confess to myself are outrageously dear, and certainly not worth the twelve guineas a box that is the modest price asked.

Pouncet gave me the following letter from Blanche :

‘ BERTIE,

‘ I may not live to see you, and I must send you these few lines. I have

always loved you, though I may have seemed hard and exacting ; but I fear sometimes my love was a selfish feeling, because I thought myself superior to you, and I liked to reflect on your failings beside my own fancied virtues. *I am dying, and I solemnly urge you to do Vera Marchmont justice, and that at once,* that she may suffer no more anxiety. I am putting it in your power, and if, when I look down on you from above, I find you both speaking or thinking kindly of me, I shall be amply repaid. Above all, cultivate humility ; for though I have made my peace with Heaven, I feel as the Pharisee might have felt on his deathbed, as he thought of all his parade of goodness.

‘ Good - bye, my love ; God bless you both !

‘ BLANCHE.’

I see Vera now and again. She is perfectly happy, and grows more charming every

day, until I wonder how my thoughts could ever have wandered from her. The prospect of becoming a mother now fills her with delight instead of nervous apprehension, and a blush of pleasure rises on her cheek if she thinks of the subject, for I have noticed it, and asked her the reason. Poor little Vera! you have suffered—you deserve to be happy. I cannot say myself I anticipate the arrival of a baby with any great enthusiasm. I can never look on the child with the same affection as if I had never had to consider its birth a very unfortunate and embarrassing occurrence.

I have nothing to fear now from Matthew Simpson, and I fancy Mrs. Nelson has accepted the inevitable, and gone back to Boanerges' bosom; while Travers assured me, as the result of his interview with the Mother Superior, that Lisette is safe in the *Sacré Cœur* for the rest of her days.

There is little more to tell. I am sitting amongst litter and packages in my dismantled bachelor rooms, to which I am soon to say a final adieu; for to-morrow we start for Venice and the Riviera on quite a regulation honeymoon. Vera has more money than she knows what to do with; but I don't think prosperity will spoil her. Her photograph is on my table as I write, and I take it up and kiss the dear little, soft, gentle face I love so well.

Ah !

I had to leave off writing, owing to a sudden and violent pain at my heart, which completely prostrated me. Fortunately Meredith came in, and he fetched a doctor. Between them they pulled me round, and for what ?

I take up my pen again, and with a melancholy office—to write my own death-warrant. The doctor examined me very carefully and

critically, his face growing graver and graver as he did so. Then he held a consultation with Meredith alone. Finally they decided to tell me.

I have got forty-eight hours to live, or perhaps the miserable span may reach out to the extent of a week ; but it is unlikely.

A weak heart to begin with, still further enfeebled by dissipation and the exciting events of late, is about to fail me. It is hard. I tried to bear the blow like a Stoic, at all events, if not like a Spartan, and I hope I succeeded ; but it was the calmness of despair. I cannot realize what has befallen me yet ; I cannot think of all that is involved. I only know that the wealth I have schemed and lied and behaved shamefully for is mine, now that it is too late for me to enjoy it ; I only know that the peaceful haven of rest I had reached after the strife is snatched from me before I have had time to realize the blessing of it ; I

only know that poor little Vera is bitterly punished for my sins.

Poor little Vera !

I feel intensely sorry for her—more than I do for myself. Thank Heaven, she is my wife, and I am rich enough to provide for her properly ! I pity her with all my heart ; the news will almost kill her. She is not of a temperament to console herself easily with another man ; I am unselfish enough to wish that she was. Verily the evil that men do lives after them. Why did I lead her astray ? She might have been married and happy with a worthier man than me. Poor Vera ! it was happiness to make atonement and make you happy ; but now even that is denied me.

Poor Blanche ! who would have thought I should follow you so soon ? I have done your bidding, and you have always had my highest admiration and respect. We parted

in peace when you left this earth ; I can meet you without flinching.

‘Meet Blanche,’ did I say ? and I laugh bitterly at my folly. That radiant, immaculate angel and my lost spirit will be divided by a bottomless gulf through all eternity. What awaits me ? To be brought face to face with death and punishment for sins like mine might well cause a bolder man to quail. Yet they say that God is merciful, and He is in that He has given me time to repent and make peace in some sort. I must plead in abject fashion with the publican of old, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner !’

Poor Vera has been sent for. I dread her coming. The doctor has gone to fetch a specialist—money is no object now—but he can do no good. I know my sentence as surely as though I had seen the Writing on the Wall.

This will be my last confidence to you, my

father confessor, the keeper of my conscience. And it is time I ended this record of my faults, follies, and failings, for I have come to the very last line in the book.

THE END.

[October, 1891.



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